JIMMY PAGE Nº2
THE MOST SOUGHT-AFTER REPLICA EVER?

KEITH RICHARDS
ON THE STONES, LIFE, LOSS & GUITARS

Guitarist

Issue 508
MARCH 2024

"This is a better guitar performance than my other records. And it should be..."

JOHN SQUIRE

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& MORE

ROSES, RIFFS AND RESURRECTION – INSIDE HIS BOLD NEW ALBUM WITH LIAM GALLAGHER

+16
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FUTURE

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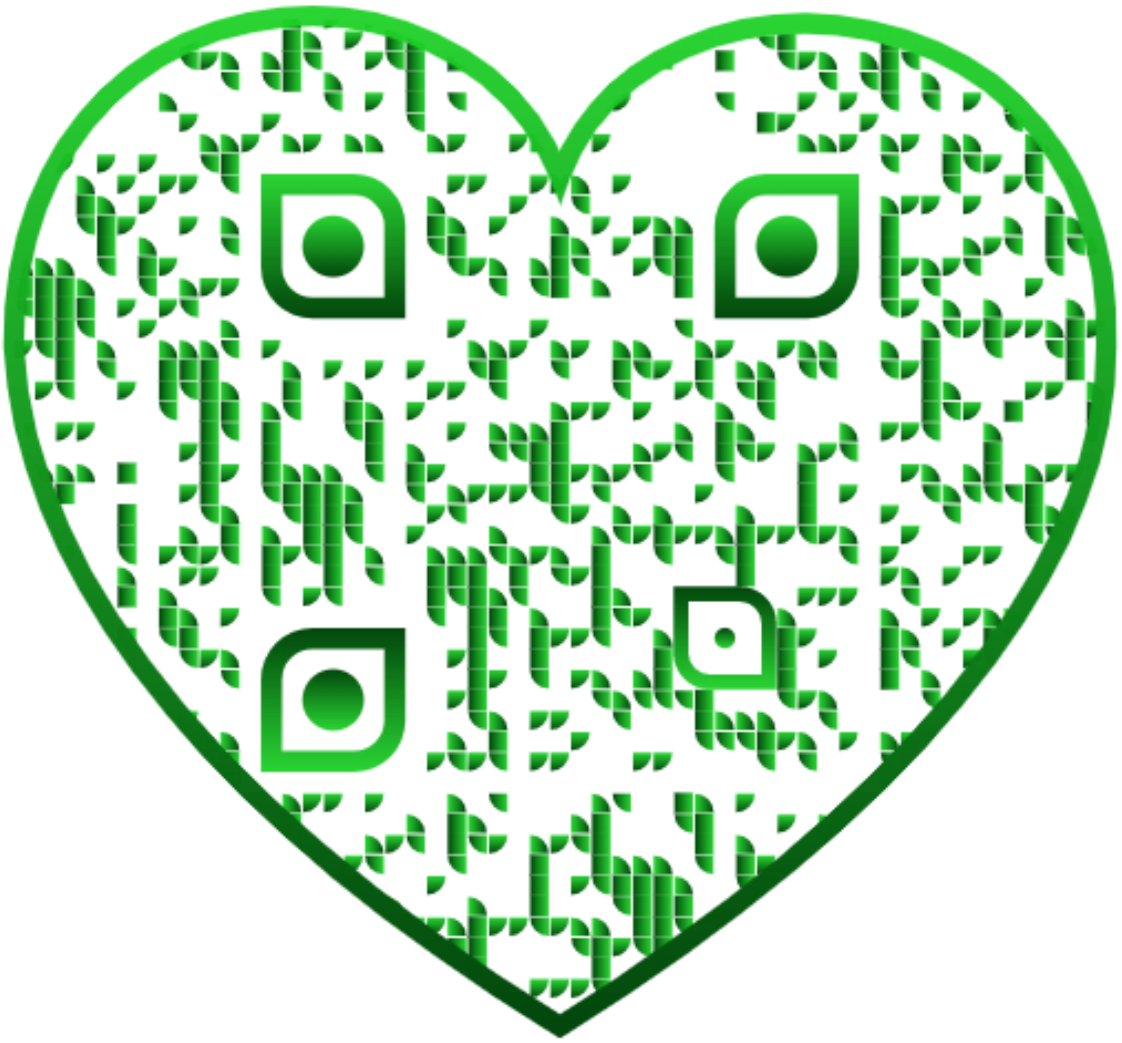

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Don't Sweat It (Too Much)

Reading this month's cover feature with John Squire, I was struck by a comment his album co-star Liam Gallagher made in our sidebar interview with him: "When people go on, like [tortured artist voice], 'I went to the depths of the universe to bring you this music'. F**k off, man. We're not curing f**king cancer. We're making music. It's either good or it's bad." It may be bluntly expressed, but it chimes with what Stones legend Keith Richards has to say on page 61: "If I sit down with a guitar or a piano and just start playing, eventually a song comes..." Because the curious thing about music is that sometimes a song that took five minutes to write ends up lodged in people's hearts for decades.

Dolly Parton wrote *Jolene* and *I Will Always Love You* on the same day. Pretty tidy work, all considered. Richard Hawley once told this magazine that he found his feet as a songwriter by learning to say 'yes' to his creative impulses, rather than self-criticising so continually that nothing made it onto the page. And, again that chimes with what Keith Richards goes on to say in this issue's interview: "I feel that I'm just receiving inspiration from everything that has gone on before me, and then I put it through my own point of view and then sort of pass it on. I almost don't feel any sense of ownership."

Lots of creative people, from novelists to painters, report a similar sense of merely being a conduit for something larger than themselves when they are in the flow of their work. But it is music, the most mercurial of the arts, where this principle feels most immediate and alive. What does it mean for the rest of us? Well, we can take Richard Hawley's lesson to heart and decide not to get choked by 'paralysis of analysis'. Is the song we're writing today the best we can ever do? Maybe not, but it's something and it has some value. Get it finished and get it out there, and if there are aspects of it you don't like, learn the lesson and incorporate it into your next song.

The important thing is to keep the taps open, keep creating. Okay, music does have its reclusive perfectionists who make one extraordinary album then fall silent for years. But, I personally think, better to keep exercising the creative muscles and let the chips fall where they may.

Enjoy the issue and see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights

Blue Melody
We take a look at a seminal 1960 Telecaster clad in Lake Placid Blue, whose finish predates the official debut of that colour by two years **p124**

Vintage Tones
Is it possible to get the custom shop vibe in a guitar under £1,500? Vintage's ProShop makes a good case on **p84**

Mighty Minis
They may be small, but boy do they pack in a lot of tone. Huw Price explores the interesting history of the mini-humbucker on **p118**

COVER: COVER IMAGE BY ADAM GASSON KEITH RICHARDS IMAGE: TODD OWYOUNG/NBC VIA GETTY IMAGES ABOVE: 1960 TELECASTER IMAGE BY PAIGE DAVIDSON/WELL STRUNG GUITARS

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- Mark Lettieri
PRS PAUL REED SMITH GUITARS
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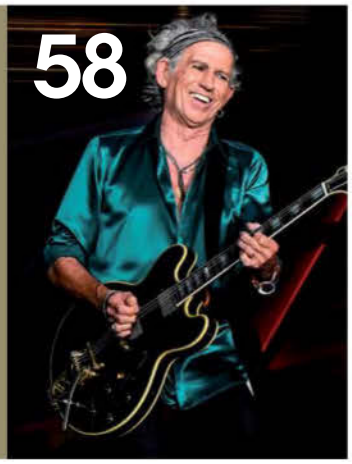

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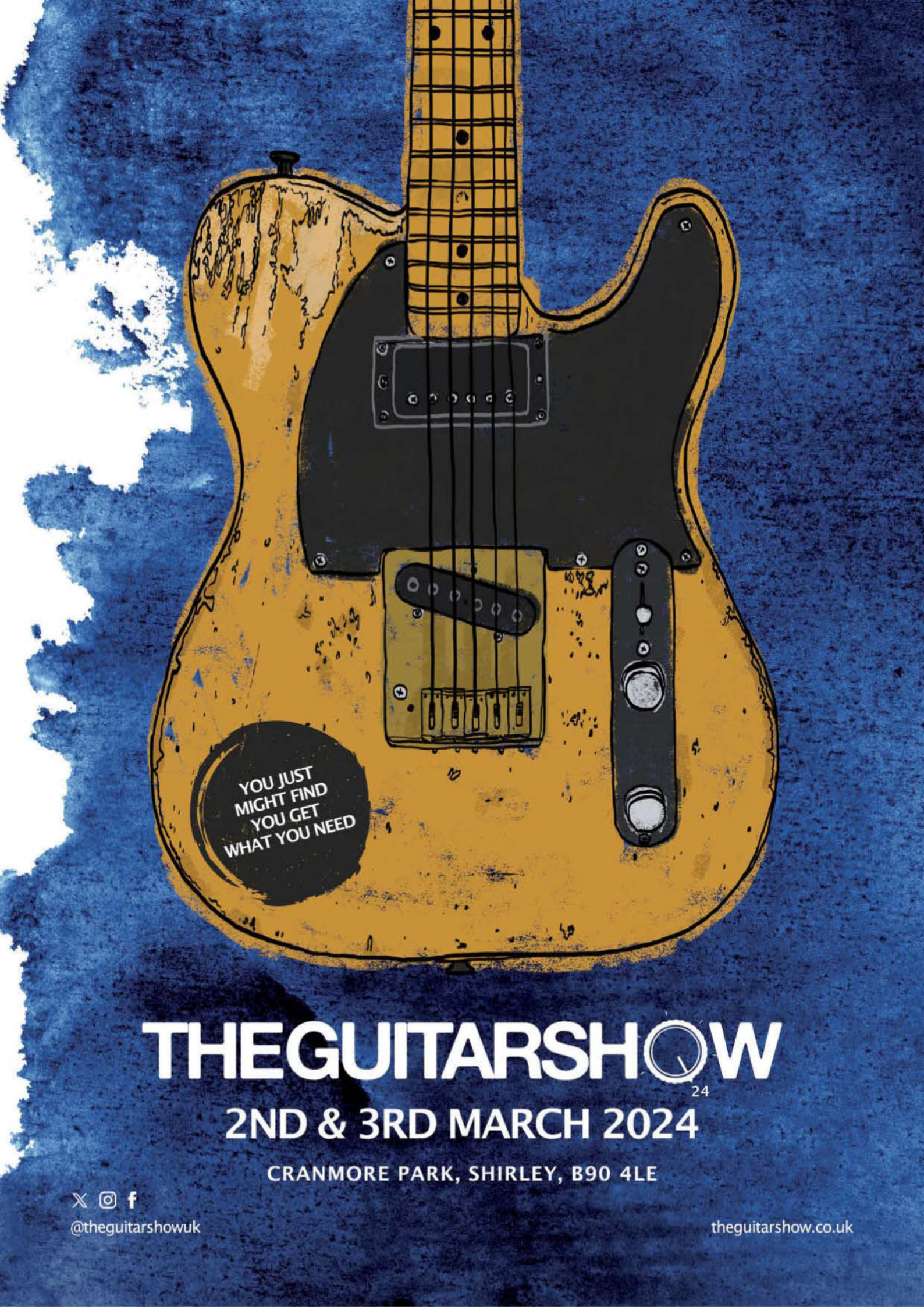

THE GUITAR SHOW 24

2ND & 3RD MARCH 2024

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PRS MT100 HEAD
£1,599

WHAT IS IT? 100-watt signature head for Creed/Alter Bridge's Mark Tremonti, made in Indonesia and with a sensible, relatively affordable price tag

Power Of Three

Bucking the recent trend for compact heads, PRS goes large with its latest signature amp for Mark Tremonti

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Olly Curtis

Mark Tremonti is one of PRS's most prolific and dedicated artists; his boundless talents are more than one or even two bands can satisfy. Having found global fame with Creed, Tremonti went on to form Alter Bridge in 2004 with Myles Kennedy, followed by a solo album project in 2010 that turned into the band Tremonti. All three projects are still on the active list, with Creed set to reform again for a tour in 2024. The guitarist is just as busy on the gear front, with Core and SE PRS models alongside the well-received MT 15 head – which is now joined by a new addition, an amp that Mark has been deeply involved with through the design and test phases and is now using in live shows, the signature MT 100 head.

The first thing that's apparent on unboxing the MT 100 is its size and weight. At a time when, in the UK at least, there's been an increasing trend toward more compact and portable products, the MT 100

Paul Reed Smith
MT 100
INPUT
PRESENCE
MASTER
BASS
MIDDLE
TREBLE
VOLUME
CLEAN
PRESENCE
MASTER
BASS
MIDDLE
TREBLE
GAIN
OVERDRIVE
MASTER
BASS
MIDDLE
TREBLE
GAIN
LEAD

1

1. The straightforward control panel is quick and easy to navigate, with three completely independent channels for Clean, Overdrive and Lead. The Clean channel's gain control is called 'Volume' but performs the same function. Each channel has its own EQ controls, so you can precisely dial in just the right sound for any venue

2. On the rear panel, you'll find a pair of send and return jacks for the MT 100's valve-buffered series effects loop. There's no footswitching function for the loop so any effects put in here stay in circuit all the time

is unapologetically large and heavy thanks to outsize transformers and a tough steel chassis. The mains transformer is possibly the biggest we've ever seen on an amp of this type. At the time of writing, we don't yet know if a matching 4x12 will be available, but visually a serious rock amp such as this needs a 4x12 or an oversized 2x12 to sit on.

Inside the chassis, most of the electronics live on one large main PCB, including the front-panel controls, preamp valve bases and a bank of nine relays. A smaller PCB strip handles the rear-panel bias connections. The sockets for the quartet of TAD Redbase 6L6s are chassis mounted and hand wired, keeping the main heat source away from the PCB and making a positive contribution to the amp's longterm reliability. Where most valve amps have separate mains and standby switches, the MT 100 has a three-way toggle for off, standby and play.

Around the back, the rear panel offers three speaker outlets, a pair of send and return jacks for the valve-buffered series effects loop, and a set of bias test points with an external adjustment screw. While the bias can be checked individually for each valve, the bias setting is a global one. The only other feature on the rear panel is a seven-pin DIN socket for the MT 100's three-button footswitch.

2

With all three gains at halfway, it covers any base, producing the definitive high-gain overdrive tones Tremonti's known for

The MT 100 is a proper three-channel head, with independent preamp channels

accessed by small push-button switches on the front panel or via the remote footswitch. Matching coloured LED indicators tell you which channel is active. Overall, the MT 100's 'none more black' steel grille, control panel and vinyl sleeve make a clear statement that this is a serious rock machine, albeit one with minimal features. However, as Tremonti himself says in his personal introductory demo video, "It's got everything you would need and nothing you don't need."

Sounds

The MT 100's three channels are optimised for an ideal starting point with all the tone and gain controls set roughly at 12 o'clock, giving the widest range of adjustment. The Clean channel has huge headroom if needed, with a punchy Fender-influenced clarity. Turning this channel's Volume (gain) control past the halfway mark adds a subtle chime effect, becoming a sweetened crunch with the volume all the way up.

The Overdrive channel takes over at this point, with a mild crunch that gets progressively wilder, transforming into a thick, harmonic-laden distortion that many amps would be proud to call a lead channel. The MT 100 still has another gear to shift up into, though, with a Lead channel that packs so much distortion it can feed back at will on practically any note. Thankfully, it's easily tamed by backing off the Gain control.

With our Les Paul, we tended to run all three gains at more or less the halfway mark, and used like this the MT 100 easily covers any base, producing the definitive high-gain overdrive tones Tremonti is known for. Swapping to single coils was equally impressive, although the higher gain settings of the Clean and Overdrive channels made us reach for a noise gate.

It goes without saying that the MT 100 is loud enough for any eventuality, although unlike many high-powered designs it also

3. Unlike most valve amps, which have separate mains and standby switches, the MT 100 combines both functions into a single three-way toggle, saving space and making for simpler operation

4. The MT 100 has individual bias test points and an adjustment pot on the rear panel to keep the quartet of 6L6 output valves running at peak efficiency for as long as possible. The bias control is global, so you need to use a matched quartet of valves for the best performance

The supplied three-button footswitch is for remote channel changing. When it's not needed, you can change channels from three small push-button switches on the amp's front panel. LED indicators on the footswitch and front panel tell you where you are at all times

Just by varying the guitar's volume control there's plenty of colour and subtlety, which is artistically rewarding to play with

sounds quite decent at bedroom levels. But let's be clear: this is not a bedroom amp, it's designed to fill huge halls and stadiums with ferocious rock riffage, delivered with clarity and authority. For maximum impact it needs to be partnered with a good 4x12 and turned up, at which point the dynamic range, articulation and bass response all come into focus in a very satisfying way.

Our favourite channel was the medium-gain Overdrive, which has enough gain and tonal range to go from jazz and blues to high-gain powerchords. Just by varying the guitar's volume control there's plenty of colour and subtlety, which is artistically rewarding to play with while being almost at odds with the MT 100's image as an all-out weapon of rock.

Verdict

While the MT 100 isn't the most compact or portable of amplification solutions, it sounds great – and sat atop a suitably big speaker cabinet it looks the part, too. Carrying around a half or full stack demands a certain commitment (or a happy road crew), and while an amp like this may not be practical for the smaller venues most of us perform in, there's no denying its stellar range of tones will bring out the best in anybody who plugs into one.

Aimed at pro, semi-pro and dedicated amateur users – and, of course, the hordes of Creed, Alter Bridge and Tremonti fans out there – the MT 100's price is another temptation, coming in at just under £1,600 thanks to offshore manufacturing. We think that's great value for money and while the MT 100 isn't overflowing with bells and whistles, you can always buy the extras you need to suit your gig and know that your amp money has all gone on the thing that really matters – great tone. Which the PRS MT 100 has by the truckload.

PRS MT100 HEAD

PRICE: £1,599
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: All valve pre and power amp
VALVES: 8x 12AX7 preamp, 4x 6L6
OUTPUT: 100W RMS
DIMENSIONS: 660 (w) x 275 (d) x 280mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 19.5/43
CABINET: Plywood
CHANNELS: 3
CONTROLS: Clean channel: Presence, Master Volume, Treble, Middle, Bass, Volume. Lead & Overdrive channels: Presence, Master Volume, Treble, Middle, Bass, Gain
FOOTSWITCH: 3-button footswitch selects channels
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Valve-buffered series effects loop. Individual valve bias test points and overall bias adjustment on rear panel
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: There's no word as yet on speaker cabinets for the MT 100. The MT 15 head retails for around £599, with a matching 1x12 cabinet at £349

PRS Europe
01223 874301
www.prsguitars.com

8/10

PROS Great-sounding and affordable three-channel head, with a simple no-frills control set that's easy to set up and use

CONS As it's big and heavy, it really needs to sit on a 4x12 to look right, which narrows its appeal; no popular modern features like DI outputs, speaker emulation or power reduction

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www.creamtcustomshop.com

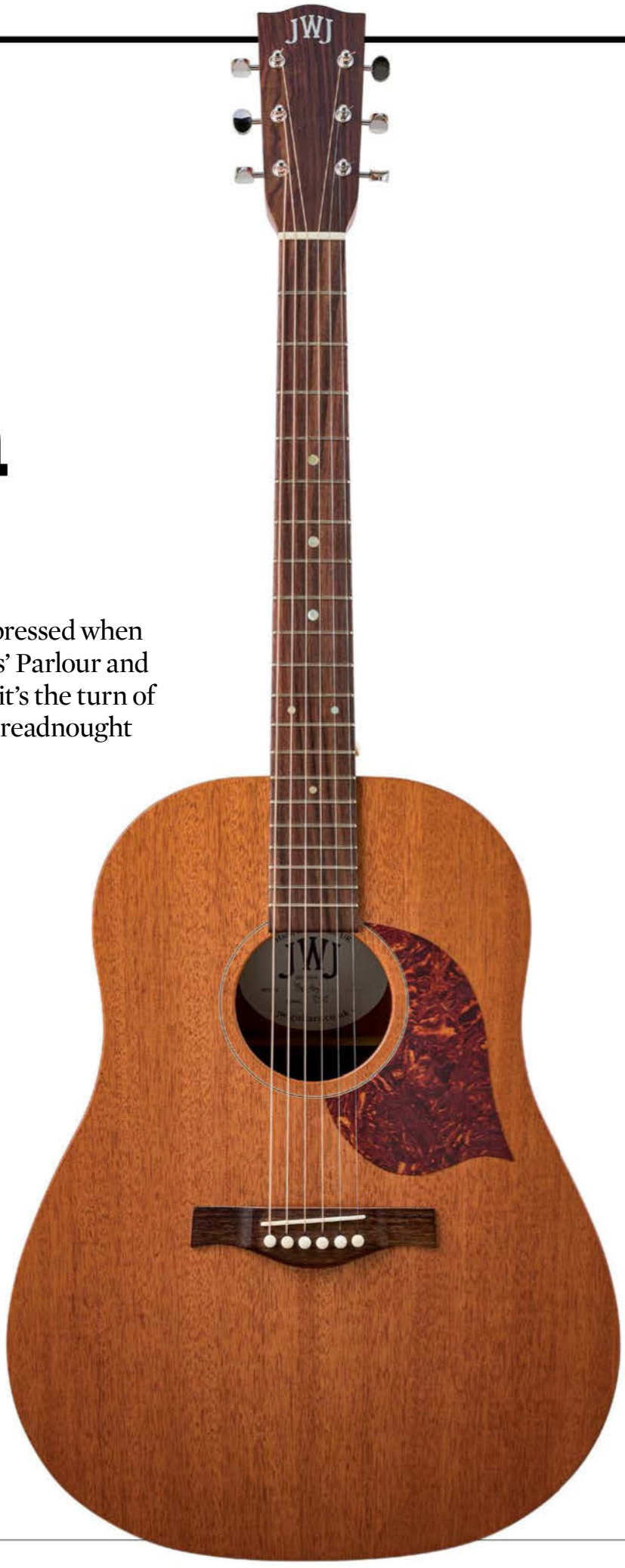
JWJ GUITARS 'THE HOG'
£1,295

WHAT IS IT? A hand-built, all-mahogany, slope-shouldered dreadnought offering quite surprising value for money

Golden Brown

Last year we were mightily impressed when we looked at builder Rich Jones' Parlour and Orchestra acoustics. This time it's the turn of his entry-level, all-mahogany dreadnought

Words David Mead **Photography** Olly Curtis



We first heard about Shropshire-based luthier Rich Jones in early 2023 when he visited our studios bearing two of his recent builds, an OM and parlour. The subsequent review was enthusiastic, to say the least, as we were extremely impressed by both the craftsmanship and the sheer musicality – not to mention the value for money – of both instruments. Back in issue 499 our verdict read: "We like both of these guitars a lot. Each has its own particular charm – the Parlour is slight in body and big in voice, it looks great, the build quality is very good and that aged cedar top sets the guitar off well. The OM is more the all-rounder with plenty of volume and a good dynamic range."

The Orchestra model went on to win itself a place in our Gear Of The Year issue and so when Rich told us that he was introducing an entry-level model into his catalogue, we couldn't resist the opportunity to take a look. Enter 'The Hog', an all-mahogany, slope-shouldered dreadnought, with the type of spec we rarely see on guitars in this price range.

1. The Hog might be designated as being an entry level instrument, but the fixtures and fittings are top notch. Check out the Kluson tuners on the guitar's headstock, for example

2. The unbound body and 'board may suggest a budget instrument, but the sound here is absolutely top class

Rich's mission statement is clear: "The aim for JWJ Guitars is simply to produce professional hand-built guitars at a great price. By keeping the standard range simple, with options for body wood and neck profile, I can focus my efforts on getting the best possible tone and feel from each instrument." Let's zoom in on The Hog and see what makes it tick...

As far as spec is concerned, it's all pretty straightforward. This is an all-mahogany guitar and so the top, back, sides and neck are all – you guessed it – mahogany. But the fact that this is Honduran mahogany changes things up a gear or two. Many manufacturers, including some of the major players, will use woods like sipo or sapele as able substitutes for mahogany in order to keep costs down. But to find this particular wood on an instrument carrying an 'entry level' tag at this price point is virtually unheard of. For the uninitiated, Honduran mahogany is a member of an elite range of body woods, up there with the finer and more rarified rosewoods.

The top here is triple-A grade mahogany with a fairly plain grain figure, but some medullary rays present when the light hits it at the right angle, particularly on the lower bout. Star of the show, however, is undoubtedly the open-pore finish, which adds an attractive rustic allure to the proceedings. Simply put, it feels good in the hands, like you're somehow one step closer to the actual wood, rather than being separated from it by a thick glossy coat. And a word or two ought to be said about the fact that this is a hand-sprayed, thin-coated nitro finish, which you don't always see at this price point, either.

The 20-fret fingerboard is rosewood, with a perfectly cut bone nut at one end of the string length and a bone saddle and string pins at the other. The tuners offer up another touch of luxury: open-back Klusons with an 18:1 tuning ratio to keep everything harmonious.

> To find Honduran mahogany on an instrument carrying an 'entry level' tag at this price point is virtually unheard of

Rich tells us that he cuts his own pickguards from large sheets of mock tortoiseshell and, ever conscious of making a personal statement, he decided to marry up the accustomed teardrop shape with a little pointed flourish of his own on the lower side. A further artistic touch is how

3. An Indian rosewood bridge is augmented with a bone saddle and string pins

4. As with the Orchestra and Parlour models we looked at last year, the quality of workmanship here is faultless

3

4

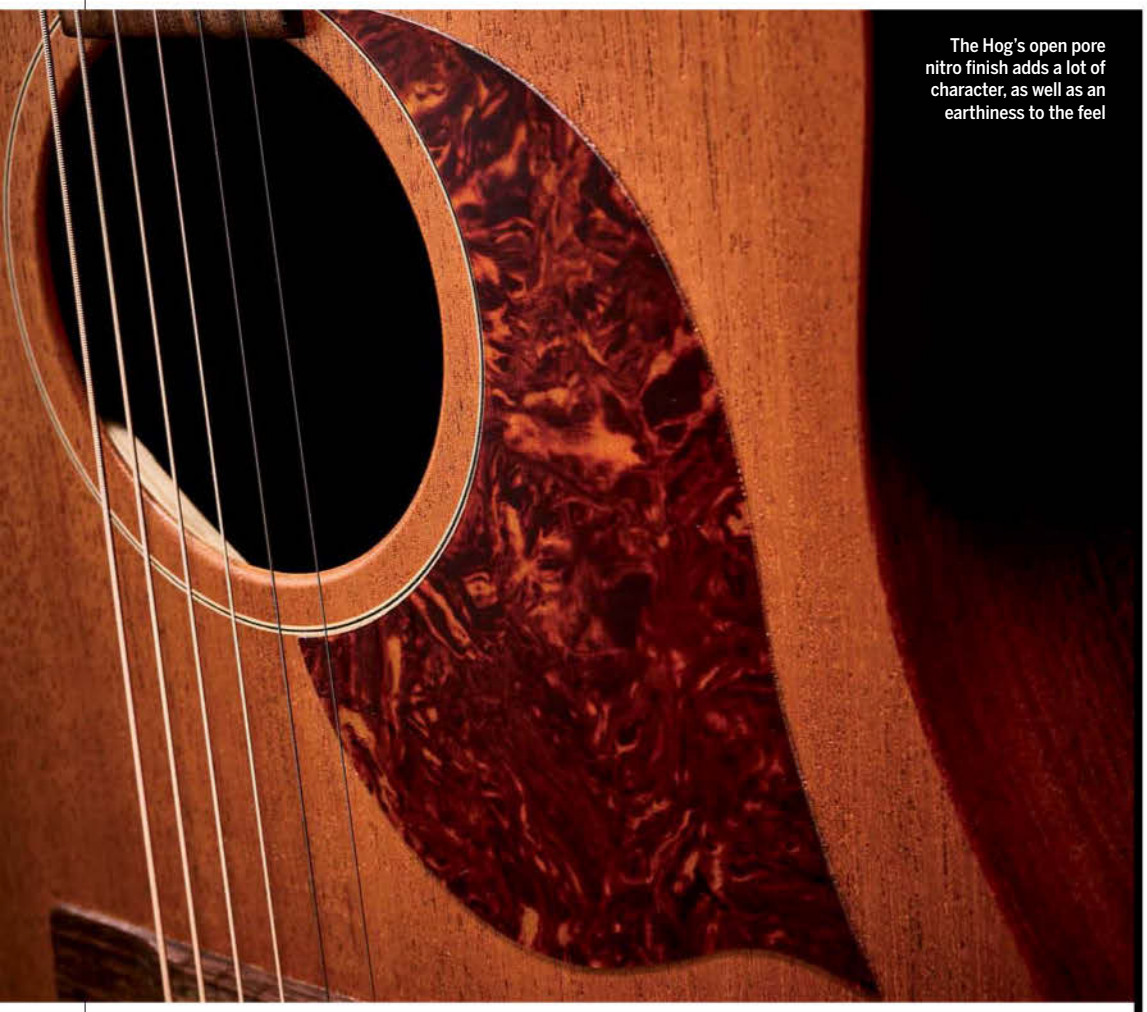
the curve on the lower edge of the Indian rosewood bridge is mirrored at the top of the headstock.

Casting an eye over the workmanship that has gone into this build we were unable to find anything that we didn't like or took undue exception to. Everything is neatly rendered both inside and out: The Hog really is a thoroughbred beast and we're eager to know if it sounds as good as it looks.

Feel & Sounds

We've already mentioned the appeal of the open-pore finish to the mahogany, but it really does feel good in the hands. The neck, too, was a revelation as it's asymmetrical, Rich telling us that he simply looked at the angle of the player's hand at the 1st and 12th frets (or thereabouts, anyway) and fashioned the neck profile so that it's slightly offset. "At the lower end for 1st position chords, the treble side is slightly dressed away like a V," Rich tells us, "while the bass side has a fuller feel to support the thumb, somewhere between a C and D. Towards the body, the neck fills out more towards the treble side to help facilitate single-note playing with a flatter back."

All this cunning lutherie adds up to the simple fact that it's a very comfortable playing experience from the cowboy chord



The Hog's open pore nitro finish adds a lot of character, as well as an earthiness to the feel

area, right up to the dusty end. It's a very light guitar in the hand, too, and so there would be no question of fatigue should you take to standing up on stage for a longish acoustic set.

Sound-wise, all-mahogany acoustics have a reputation for offering a warm midrange, with good basses and sweet, rounded trebles, and The Hog lands right in the middle of that runway. It's loud without being brash and, as we found with the Parlour and OM last year, remains eminently musical with whatever you choose to throw its way. We tried some country blues fingerstyle, open-chord strumming and single-note soloing and The Hog maintained its perfect table manners throughout. Another factor with Honduran mahogany is that it gets better with age and so everything that's already here, in terms of the guitar's soundscape, will improve as the years pass.

The asymmetrical neck is a revelation – Rich looked at the angle of the player's hand at the 1st and 12th frets to fashion the profile

Our Hog has no pickup fitted and so we weren't able to hear how it would fare through an amplifier. Adding a pickup adds £300 to the cost (you have the choice between LR Baggs' excellent Lyric or HiFi models), and even when you factor this extra hike into the equation, The Hog still represents amazing value for money.

Verdict

Let's just remind ourselves exactly what The Hog features in terms of spec. For a little under £1.3k you're getting a hand-crafted instrument made from premium bodywoods, a hand-applied nitro finish, upscaled hardware in terms of string pegs, tuners and so on, and to cap it all, the whole package comes in a Hiscox Pro II hard case, which would itself cost around £180 if you bought it as an accessory. Put all this together with the JWJ's sound, feel and addictive playability and the whole deal becomes something of a no-brainer. The Hog is quite simply one of the best 'entry level' acoustic guitars we've experienced. G

JWJ 'THE HOG'

PRICE: £1,295 (inc case)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: All-mahogany, slope-shoulder dreadnought
TOP: AAA grade honduras mahogany
BACK/SIDES: Honduras mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 119mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 400mm
NECK: 1-piece Honduras mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9")
TUNERS: Kluson open-back 18:1 ratio
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Indian Rosewood
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Indian rosewood/57mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.58/3.5
OPTIONS: LR Baggs Lyric or HiFi pickups add £300
RANGE OPTIONS: Custom builds available from £1,695. Parlour, Orchestra, Dreadnought and Slope Shoulder models, C, D, V or A neck profiles
LEFT HANDERS: Yes, no upcharge
FINISH: Natural satin nitrocellulose

JWJ Guitars
07968 590718
https://jwjguitars.co.uk

Guitarist GOLD

10/10

PROS Amazing build quality, boasting elite body woods and wonderful tones

CONS We honestly couldn't find a thing!

LOS ROMEROS

THE MERCURY MASTERS

Decca Classics proudly unveils The Complete Mercury recordings of LOS ROMEROS, the 'Royal Family of the Guitar.' This limited-edition box set, features remastered quartet recordings, iconic Flamenco performances, and the 1960 Contemporary Records albums. Dive into six decades of timeless virtuosity, complemented by liner notes from Walter Aaron Clark and Thomas Fine. Celebrate the legacy of Los Romeros, honored with the Recording Academy President's Merit Award. Don't miss this extraordinary musical journey captured in a deluxe, illustrated box set.

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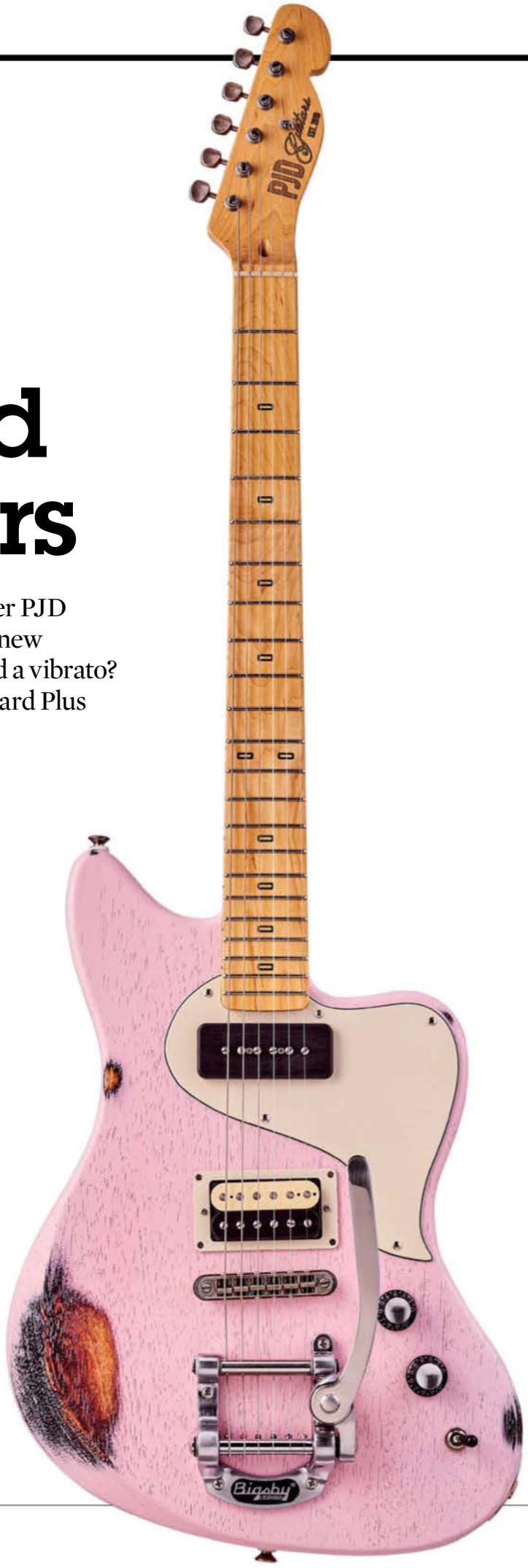
PJD GUITARS ST JOHN STANDARD PLUS
£1,749

WHAT IS IT? UK-made, lightweight solidbody modern offset with Bigsby, in-house-made PJD pickups and lightly aged finish

Standard Shimmers

Back in 2023, revitalised Brit-maker PJD rejigged its range to start with the new solidbody hardtail Standards. Need a vibrato? No problem: here comes the Standard Plus

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

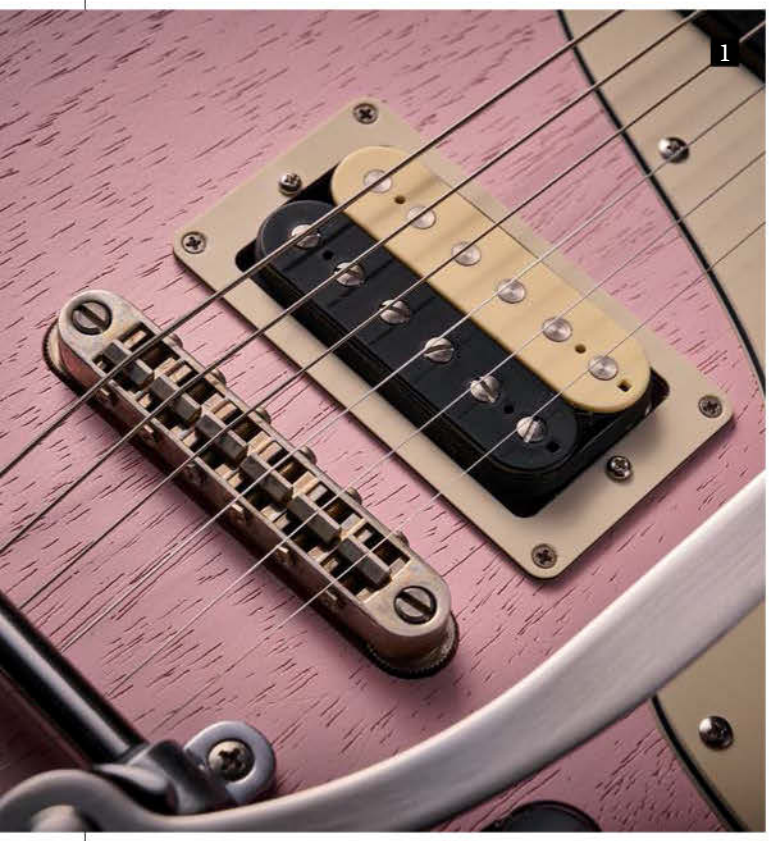


Production-style methodology has always been at the heart of PJD: clean craft and design, well executed and far from expensive. In fact, its new Standard range – which kicked off in 2023 and includes the single-cut Carey, the S-style Woodford, the original-shaped T-inspired York and PJD's previously best-selling offset St John – actually kicks off at just £1,299. The next Standard Plus tier all include vibratos at £1,499, while a lightly worn-looking 'spray over' finish, available on both levels, adds between £250 and £300.

The York-based brand has also recently installed a Plek machine to add further consistency as the company slowly ramps up production. It's a long way from the 'man-in-shed' style of many Brit makers. But while the build is purposely streamlined, the craft remains very tidy.

The main difference between the new 2023-onwards Standards and the earlier, more expensive models of the same name is the switch from chambered lightweight ash bodies to solid (but still lightweight) obeche. While the inspiration is obvious with our offset – it's slightly downsized from the Jazzmaster template – we get an arm-rest-style forearm contour and a lightly dished

Bigsby
LICENSED



1. This lightly aged Gotoh tune-o-matic is recessed into the body, reducing the string angle to the Bigsby and helping with tuning stability

ribcage cutaway on the back. The edges are radiused like a Strat or Jazzmaster, unlike the sharper chamfered edges of the original Standards, while the finish is very thin nitro that's silky smooth and open pore. There are quite a few finish options, too, including the Shell Pink over sunburst of our review model – hardly a true relic, but it all ties in with the lightly aged hardware to create a far from precious lived-in and well-gigged feel.

Another change from the earlier Standards is that the often figured, quarter-sawn roasted maple stock used for their necks switches to industry-standard slab-sawn unroasted maple, again with a super-smooth light satin finish. We also have a more regular transfer headstock logo; the earlier models' logos were cut with a laser. The relatively small body heel is very rounded and the neck is held to the body with recessed bolts, not screws.

More changes come with the pickups, which are now made in-house (rather than aftermarket, typically Bare Knuckle Boot Camp or Cream T) with whimsical names: a zebra-coil Wadfather at the bridge and a Parkins Cream soapbar single coil in the neck position (see Under The Hood opposite). Controls are simple and there's nothing to get in the way of rocking this one.

2. Instead of using third-party suppliers such as Bare Knuckle or Cream T that featured on the previous Standards, all PJD pickups are now wound in-house. This is the Parkins Cream, a pretty juicy-sounding soapbar single coil

3. While the old PJD Standards used a laser-cut logo, an identifier of the new Standards is the transfer logos here. As ever, we get a finely fettled bone nut and Gotoh split-post tuners

The feel is hugely engaging and on playability alone it's like we're playing a much more expensive guitar

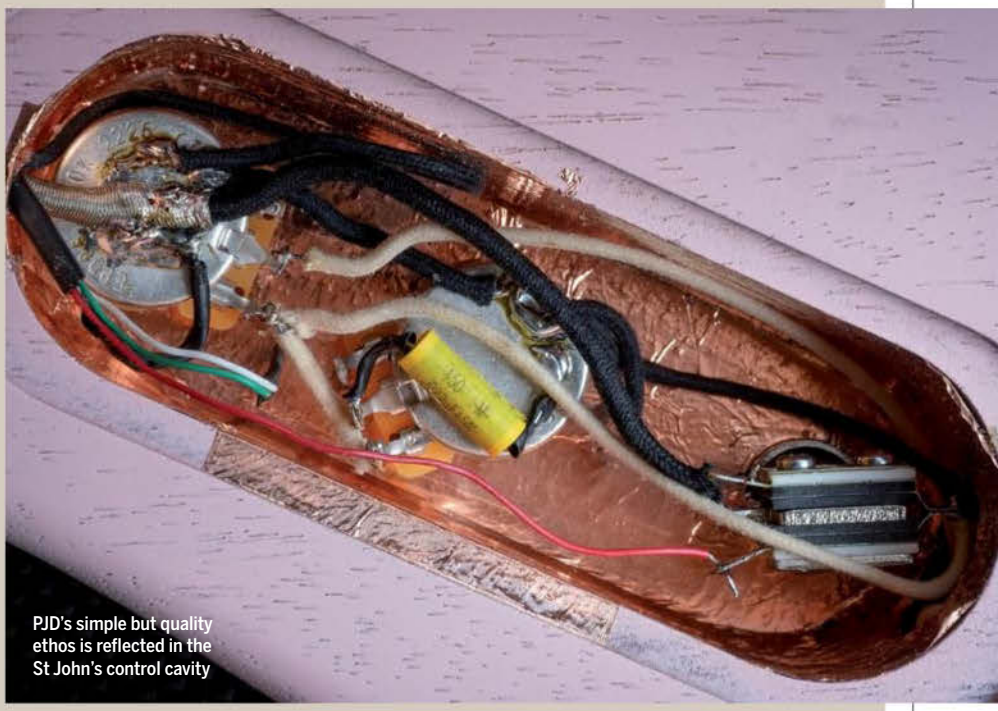
Feel & Sounds

The fretwork and setup on those earlier Standard models was always exemplary and nothing changes here. We now have a standard 254mm (10-inch) fingerboard radius, as opposed to the earlier lightly compound radius, although the medium jumbo Jescar frets remain the same and they are perfectly installed and mirror-polished, plus there's some light fingerboard edge rolling.

UNDER THE HOOD Does the careful craft continue inside?

Lifting off the recessed rear plastic plate we get a T-sized cavity, nicely copper-foil lined like the coverplate. The simple circuit uses quality components with two CTS 500kohms pots and a Switchcraft toggle pickup selector switch. What looks like a Mallory capacitor, rated at .022µF, is used for the tone control. It's wired modern-style using cloth-covered wire, although there's no treble bleed circuit here as we suspected.

The pickups are hand-wound by Josh Parkin, hence the Parkins Cream soapbar in the neck position, which uses 42 AWG coil wire and a pair of Alnico IV magnets; it measures 7.41k. The zebra-coiled four-conductor Wadfather humbucker at the bridge employs 43 AWG coil wire and an Alnico V magnet with a DCR reading of 13.52k, and pays homage to Damian Probett of Probett Guitars who also works for PJD: "Because he loves Wadkin's machinery," says PJD's Leigh Dovey. "He's got a Wadkin pin-router that's about 1,000 years old [laughs], but it works incredibly well."



PJD's simple but quality ethos is reflected in the St John's control cavity

The new Standards all have solid obeche bodies and feature heavily shaped body heels. Proper bolts (not screws) are used to hold the neck to the body, as they have been since the early PJDs models

The neck shapes have subtly changed, however. Our earlier Standard model measures 22.1mm in depth at the 1st fret and 23mm by the 12th, whereas our new Standard Plus checks in at 20.5mm at the 1st and 21.8mm by the 12th. It's a noticeably thinner-feeling neck, but, if anything, the new shaping feels better in the hand because it's fractionally narrower and is a near-perfect C with lovely sloping shoulders. The fretwork – not to mention the perfect Plek setup – also feels somehow smoother.

Just checking over the guitar unplugged, there's nothing 'cost effective' at all about the feel. It's hugely engaging and on playability alone we're feeling like we're playing a much more expensive guitar. It even feels more expensive than our own well-gigged original Standard in that department, and we've always thought that was pretty good.

While the new York Standard we reviewed last year was, by intent, a lively and good-sounding T-style, this St John comes across as the snotty-nosed yob of the family. The Wadfather sends our clean channel into light break-up, and our usually 'on the edge of break-up' crunch channel is nodding towards juicy saturation. It's a hot-sounding pickup that pulls down the resonant frequency and rounds the highs with a full-fat midrange thickness. The neck pickup might be

PRODUCTION MOVES

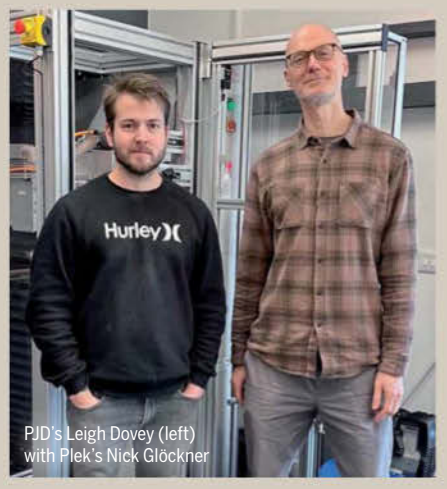
PJD is the latest UK builder to install the near-mythical Plek machine. Will it change their world? We find out

The Plek is a sophisticated computer-controlled machine designed to achieve optimum playability for fretted instruments – electric or acoustic. Developed during the 1990s in Germany by Gerd Anke and his team, the Plek machine began being used in the very early 2000s by the likes of veteran guitar-repair guru Charlie Chandler here in the UK and Joe Glaser in Nashville, the first repairer in the USA to install the system in 2001. Since then it's been adopted by plenty more, not just repairers but manufacturers, too, not least Gibson and Martin, and more recently retailers such as Peach Guitars and Andertons here in the UK.

PJD is hardly on the same scale in terms of output as those legendary USA manufacturers, and PJD's pre-Plek'd guitars haven't lacked in the setup or playability departments. So, what's the appeal? "We discussed it a lot up here," PJD's founder, Leigh Dovey, tells us. "It's not just 'put a guitar in the machine and it comes out playing amazingly'. It's a tool that's used by people who are already very, very good at what they do. But dialling things in to within a thousandth of an inch is something that only a machine can do and it's *very* consistent."

In brief, PJD's Plek Station initially scans the fingerboard with strings on and tensioned. "Each string gets its own set of results, at all fret positions [and] the results can be grouped together to give an overall picture," the Plek website explains. Then it begins levelling and recrowning each individual fret to achieve the optimum playing action. It also cuts the nut slots to the correct height.

Leigh continues: "For us, time does factor in, but it's more that we can get a really, really consistently good playing action. You see, all our Standard guitars have the same scale length, the same radius, the same frets and the same string gauge. The Plek machine is perfect for that. I don't care how good you are, you're not going to get the same level of consistency [by hand]. If you're only building two guitars a month, that's a different thing and you wouldn't need a Plek because you've got the luxury of time to spend making sure it's perfect. But using the Plek also frees up Luke Bushby, who does all our fretting. It doesn't finish the ends of the frets – we still have to do that – but it means he can spend less time doing the laborious stuff, the levelling and recrowning, which on repetition becomes quite labour-intensive. So, time does come into it, but it's more about being about to offer the best-playing guitar we possibly can.



PJD's Leigh Dovey (left) with Plek's Nick Glöckner

> "The Plek machine [gives us] a really, really consistently good playing action"
> ***Leigh Dovey***

"It all takes about 20 minutes, which is pretty quick," Leigh adds, "and once you've done it a few times it all makes sense. It's a lot quicker than doing it by hand. After the Plek process we then give the frets a buff and we shape the top of the nut. That's the only thing it doesn't do, although that is something Plek are working on – a completely finished, rounded nut, which would be fantastic!"

Have you compared the Plek process to the human method, we wonder? "Yes, and it's kinda weird. Initially, we couldn't quite put our finger on exactly why the Plek process feels better. The fretwork that Luke does is world-class, exceptional; he's got very good at it. But you're talking about such small tolerances and it's often those that turn a guitar from pretty good to amazing. In the right hands, I feel it's better, although I'm not surprised."

Custom Wares

While PJD has been concentrating on offering its new affordable Standards, the company hasn't forgotten the bespoke market with its new Custom Shop. "Basically, it's just myself and Josh Parkin working on a small number of instruments," says Leigh. "We discuss the build directly with the customer: wood selection, neck profiles, different setups – all these options are on the table. It's where we can have a bit of fun as well, not just with the guitars but with the pickups as well."

Up to this point those pickups have all been hand-wound by Josh, but more mechanisation is now in play with a new automated pickup winding machine that'll produce the units for the Standard series models.

"[2023 was] about getting things in place," concludes Leigh, "so for 2024 we're now looking to make between 25 and 30 Standard guitars a month. In the Custom Shop we're aiming for a lot less, around 100 in total – one or two a week." Clearly busy times ahead with a lot more to come.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEIGH DOVEY

PJD isn't a fan of tricky electronics, so it's a standard master volume and tone drive here, although a coil-split switch for the beefy Wadfather bridge humbucker might prove useful

based on a pickup that was conceived in the mid-1940s, but it holds its own here with push, edge and vocal depth, and while the mix certainly isn't a classic offset voice it adds some welcome bounce and nicely rounded jangle – very Peter Buck, in fact.

It doesn't sound like we have a treble bleed on the volume, so pulling that down obviously cleans things up a little, but you do lose a little definition. There's no coil-split for the bridge, either, which would probably work well to add a little Fender-y attack on its own or voiced with the neck. So, while it might not be the most stylistically versatile PJD we've ever plugged in, don't be fooled by the light pink finish – this St John has certainly got attitude in truck loads.

It might not be the most stylistically versatile PJD, but this St John has attitude in truck loads

The Bigsby is no wide-travel whammy, but the light shimmers here add some welcome retro flavour to the St John. That recessed tune-o-matic has smooth saddle grooves and slightly rocks as you move the arm, and the light travel means that tuning stability is very good, too. No complaints here.

Verdict

The new PJD Standards are very aggressively priced for a UK build, and although the combination of the Plus-level vibrato and the 'spray over' finish increases the cost here, the quality and feel of the build remains superb. Yes, we'd love to see a more classic pickup set option, not least for those of us that use pedals to increase power and thickness. But as it is, the St John excels at powerful indie/alt-rock and more. It's a really strong-sounding voice, though both the neck and mix can sound very sweet with a little volume reduction, too.

Moreover, it's the feel and playability and the new, more mainstream neck shape that punch well above the price point here. Superb craft in non-precious dress and an obvious choice for any gigging musician. G

PJD GUITARS ST JOHN STANDARD PLUS

PRICE: £1,749 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Offset-shaped solidbody electric
BODY: Obeche
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.23mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, rectangular black acrylic inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 22, medium (Jescar 55090)
HARDWARE: Recessed tune-o-matic bridge, licensed Bigsby B50 vibrato, Gotoh vintage-style SD91 split-post tuners – light aged nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: PJD Wadfather zebra-coiled humbucker (bridge), Parkins Cream single coil soapbar (neck), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.93/6.45
OPTIONS: Colour choice with 'spray over' option (adds £250-£300). More options during 2024
RANGE OPTIONS: Carey, York, St John and Woodford models start in the new Standard spec at £1,299. All come with Bigsby vibratos as the Standard Plus (except the Woodford, which uses a synchronised vibrato) and are priced at £1,499. PJD also now offers a custom service (£POA)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no extra charge
FINISHES: Shell Pink 'spray over' (as reviewed), Cream Soda, Midnight Black, Sonic Blue, Ocean Jade Metallic, Aubergine, TV Yellow, Firemist Gold, Pelham Blue, 3 Tone Sunburst – low-gloss open-pore nitro body; satin nitro neck/'board

PJD Guitars
07791 236 353
www.pjdguitars.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Crisp build and excellent weight; proper bolt-on neck join; new neck shape; big rock-aimed voices; large colour choice; nicely integrated Bigbsy vibrato

CONS A more classic pickup set option would broaden the sonic appeal – watch this space

BOSS KATANA-AIR EX COMBO
£544

WHAT IS IT?
Desktop wireless amp with a maximum of 35 watts output power

Air Supply

Boss's new Katana addition pumps up the volume – suited to serious players looking for a compact, wireless amp solution

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Olly Curtis

1. The Katana-Air EX's slightly larger cabinet encloses a pair of five-inch special-design loudspeakers for a more powerful stereo experience. Power output is 35 watts on mains, reducing to 20 watts when on batteries

2. The programmable amp voices, EQ and effects are accessed from the Boss Tone Studio app, which runs on Android or iOS. You can stream audio via Bluetooth, with optional Bluetooth footswitch or expression pedals for wireless performance control

3. A recessed control panel gives the Katana-Air EX more of a proper amp look and feel. The familiar Katana controls are augmented with indicators for Bluetooth and wireless functions, with a second jack socket to charge the supplied wireless transmitter

4. There is a pair of line out sockets for live or recording console connection, in addition to the Type-B USB socket, which connects to a computer for four-channel audio recording

Since its introduction in 2016, Boss's Katana range has become a byword for quality, affordable guitar amplification, with products to cater for every need, from the flagship Katana-Artist to the Katana-Air desktop combo, the world's first totally wireless guitar amplifier. The Katana-Air removes the need for cables and leads, creating a cleaner and less cluttered home environment as well as providing the freedom to take your amp anywhere. Now Boss has added a new addition to the range with more of a professional focus, the Katana-Air EX.

The most obvious difference between the Air EX and the original Air is the larger ported wood cabinet, which houses a pair of five-inch specially designed loudspeakers that are intended to produce a bigger, richer sound. The cosmetics have been subtly altered as well, with a recessed control panel, chrome screws in the corners of the speaker grille and a conventional strap handle, giving the Air EX a look and feel that lines up with the larger Katana amps.

The control panel's five-way amp-type rotary selector offers a choice of clean crunch and lead voices, together with a special acoustic mode and Boss's famous 'Brown' sound, taken from the award-winning Waza amp head. This feeds familiar control knobs for gain, volume, EQ and effects, which can be edited and stored from a mobile device using the Boss Tone Studio app and saved into six onboard patches.

Around the back, the Air EX gains a pair of stereo line out jack sockets, plus a USB Type-B connector for recording directly to a computer. The amp can run off mains or batteries, with an optional rechargeable power pack giving up to 16 hours of cable freedom, although more typical run-times with AA batteries are around seven hours.

In use, the Katana-Air EX's bigger speakers deliver a powerful 'proper' amp sound, enriched by the stereo effects, which can sound huge when the line out sockets are hooked up to external powered speakers or a console. There's no noticeable latency from the wireless transmitter, which switches on automatically when movement is detected.

Overall, the Katana-Air EX's bigger speakers and line outs give it the flexibility for live and studio use as well as home practice. The wireless experience can be further enhanced with an optional Bluetooth footswitch and expression pedal. For home users and serious players looking for a cable-free amp, it's a great choice. G

BOSS KATANA-AIR EX COMBO

PRICE: £544
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Digital modelling preamp, stereo power amp
OUTPUT: 35W RMS on mains, 20W RMS on batteries
DIMENSIONS: 414 (w) x 192 (d) x 236mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 5.6/12.3
CABINET: Wood
CHANNELS: 5x programmable amp voices
CONTROLS: Amp type, gain, volume, bass, middle, treble, 2x effects select, reverb level, master volume, Bluetooth pairing, power, patch store/select
FOOTSWITCH: Optional Bluetooth MIDI footswitch can be customised for many functions. Optional Bluetooth expression pedal
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: USB recording out, stereo line out sockets for console connection, front panel headphones/recording out. Wireless guitar transmitter (supplied)
OPTIONS: EV-1WL wireless expression pedal (£163); FS-1WL wireless footswitch (£112). Rechargeable BTY-NIMH/A power pack gives up to 16 hours of playtime (£108)
RANGE OPTIONS: Smaller original Katana-Air (£461)

Roland Europe
www.boss.info/uk

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Compact wireless solution; uprated version with larger speakers and stereo line outs, better suited to serious players; sounds bigger (but power output is the same)

CONS For full use of all wireless features you need the Bluetooth MIDI footswitch and expression pedal, making it quite pricey

FLATTLEY DG FUZZ
£259

WHAT IS IT? Fuzz pedal based on a Fuzz Face with extended tonal capabilities

Face Lift

Flattley releases an upgraded 1960s-style silicon fuzz with a buffer and extended tonal options

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. The pedal's aesthetics place it firmly in the company's more ornate Platinum range, with *Día de Muertos* sugar-skull-inspired metal-flake livery and a high-gloss finish over multiple layers of paint and lacquer
2. The Grunt knob varies the input signal frequency response before it is distorted by the fuzz section. Essentially, you can EQ the signal going into the fuzz – turn it up for a fatter sound
3. The halo light ring surrounding the footswitch diffuses the light when playing live, avoiding the off-putting brightness you may get from standard LEDs

The last Flattley pedal we looked at was The Ace tone booster in issue 495 but now the company has returned with a closely related release. The brand says this new version of its DG Fuzz is effectively a double pedal: a 60s-style fuzz that now incorporates a simplified version of The Ace and a typical period tone stack in one four-knob enclosure.

The pedal has its roots in the Fuzz Face circuit of the late 1960s. Featuring BC108 transistors, it'll give you a taste of that silicon Fuzz Face experience from drive sounds to fully saturated and decent volume-knob clean-up. However, it goes beyond that with fine-tuning of the tone via pre- and post-fuzz EQ and increased output. The inclusion of a buffer also means the pedal's placement in a chain can be more flexible – it doesn't have to be first in the chain for it to receive the correct impedance from your pickups.

Alongside the Volume and Fuzz knobs, the DG Fuzz offers Tone and Grunt controls. The Tone knob set at minimum allows all frequencies through but rolls off the bottom-end as you turn it clockwise. The Grunt knob is part of the internal buffer and works on the input signal before it hits the fuzz section; basically, it can beef up the signal that drives the fuzz for different tonal outcomes. With the Grunt knob at maximum you're putting the most amount of bass into the fuzz, which – combined with the Tone knob in a low position – gives you a really fat fuzz with loads of sustain that's great for a rounded liquid lead tone on the neck pickup.

While Grunt is the tone thickener, the Tone knob is more extreme, making the top-end become more dominant as you advance it, to the point of getting scratchy and downright nasty if you keep the Grunt at minimum. Simply put, these two work in conjunction to give you a huge range of just how your fuzz sits in the tonal spectrum, interacting closely with the other two knobs for much more versatility than you'd expect in a fuzzbox of this lineage.

Verdict

Delivering a classic strain of fuzz over a broad tonal range, a set of carefully thought-out features endows the DG Fuzz with a flexibility that should see it suited to many players.

FLATTLEY DG FUZZ

PRICE: £259
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Fuzz pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Volume, Fuzz, Tone, Grunt, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 50mA
DIMENSIONS: 70 (w) x 120 (d) x 53mm (h)

Flattley Guitar Pedals
07802 455127
www.flattleyguitarpedals.com

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Excellent fuzz sound; good output level; practical tonal options; buffer; halo light ring; footswitch topper; great artwork and finish

CONS It's a bit pricey

THE RIVALS

The SolidGoldFX If 6 Was 9 MkII (£199) is a versatile updated silicon Fuzz Face with Voltage, Bias and Saturation knobs and toggle-switched Tight and Thick fuzz voicings. Elsewhere, Jim Dunlop owns the rights to the classic round Fuzz Face and has a few variations including a Mini Silicon Fuzz Face (£149), although Dunlop's nearest pedals to the DG Fuzz are probably the MXR Classic 108 Fuzz (£169) and Classic 108 Fuzz Mini (£129), which have a switchable buffer but no tone controls. If you're looking for a versatile fuzz with a wide range of sounds, check out the Walrus Audio Eons Five State Fuzz (£215).

Walrus Audio's Eons Five State Fuzz is a versatile option

EVENTIDE RIPTIDE
£329

WHAT IS IT? A dual-footswitch pedal that offers both drive and Uni-Vibe sounds in any serial order

Vibe 'n' Drive

Eventide's latest dot9 series pedal combines two independent effects for some classic vintage-rock sounds

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. You access Preset mode by pressing and holding the Vibe footswitch. Scroll through the presets with the Vibe footswitch and load your selection with the Drive footswitch. A lit red LED indicates the preset you're on
2. Press the Swap LED button to toggle the pedal's effect order. When the LED is off, the Vibe comes before the Drive; when it's on, the Drive comes first
3. The Drive and Vibe LED buttons light up when the effects are active; they're also used to toggle between the two voices (Green or Red) for each effect
4. You can connect to the Eventide Device Manager Mac/PC application via USB for software updates, system settings and creating/saving presets

The sound of a Uni-Vibe combined with dirt (whether that be a driven amp, a fuzzbox or a combination of both) is one of those classic rock tones that is instantly familiar. Eventide has attempted to capture that in a single DSP-based pedal by including independently footswitchable Vibe and Drive circuits. What's more, the company has settled the perennial question about whether to put drive before or after the vibe by giving you the choice to change the order via a front-panel switch. This leaves you to compare which variation best suits the musical task at hand.

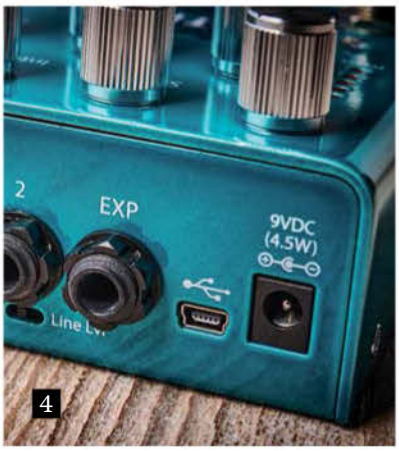
The Riptide can be run in mono or stereo and there's nothing in everyday operation that you can't do from the intuitive front panel. Both Vibe and Drive have alternate voicings that are toggled between as indicated by a LED button above the relevant footswitch. The Red drive is the most transparent of the two, with the Green drive offering a Tube Screamer-like pushed midrange. Both offer a wide range of options from clean boost through mild crunch up to full cranked amp-style distortion.

The Green Vibe delivers traditional Uni-Vibe sounds with standard Speed and Intensity variation but with a Vibe knob that morphs between dry and 100 per cent wet sound (which is where you'll want to be for emulating a Uni-Vibe's Vibrato mode). Uni-Vibe Chorus mode is at midday on the knob, but there's plenty of variation available, especially if you want just a tickle of effect. Switch to Red Vibe and the sound gets a little more intense, bringing out the deep phasiness of the effect.

Both effects work really well together (whichever order you put them in) with plenty of great combined settings waiting to be discovered. Settings can be stored in the five onboard preset slots, and the combined effect can be activated/bypassed by a single footswitch. In Preset mode, the Vibe footswitch scrolls through the presets, while the Drive footswitch loads the preset and performs overall bypass with either latching or momentary action. For more performance options you can add an expression pedal to morph through any grouping of knob parameters.

Verdict

Putting these two effects in one pedal with flexible routing is a great idea, but it wouldn't work if either of them was under par. That's not the case here as *both* sound great, making this a strong choice for pedalboard practicality..



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EVENTIDE RIPTIDE

PRICE: £329
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Drive and vibe pedal
FEATURES: Multiple Bypass options, 5 accessible presets (127 via MIDI), selectable Guitar/Line input, MIDI capability over TRS or USB, software editor, Catch-up mode
CONTROLS: Vibe, Speed, Intensity, Drive, Tone, Level, Swap LED button, Drive LED button, Vibe LED button, Mono/Stereo switch, I/O Level switch, Drive footswitch, Vibe footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard TS (Mono) or TRS (Stereo) input, standard outputs 1&2, Exp, USB
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 200mA
DIMENSIONS: 102 (w) x 115 (d) x 60mm (h)

Source Distribution
020 8962 5080
www.eventideaudio.com

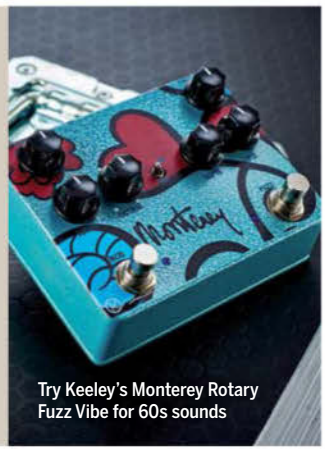
Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Uni-Vibe and drive sounds in one pedal; flexible footswitching; stereo Uni-Vibe sounds; onboard presets; software editing; MIDI

CONS Some think fuzz should be confined to certain classic sounds, but try putting a fuzz in front of this and using the drive post-vibe

THE RIVALS

Keeley has a pair of pedals that feature vibe with dirt: the company says its Monterey Rotary Fuzz Vibe (£319) puts the 60s in a box, while the Dark Side pedal (£299) is inspired by David Gilmour and has three basic elements – Fuzz, Delay and Modulation (Flanger, Rotary Speaker Cabinet, U-Vibe, and Phaser). Elsewhere, if you have cash to spare, you could check out Jam Pedals' custom pedal-building service (two to six pedals: $/€500 to $/€1,500) where the team will put several of their pedals into one enclosure. For starters, how about the RetroVibe with a Eureka! fuzz in front of it and a TubeDreamer following?



Try Keeley's Monterey Rotary Fuzz Vibe for 60s sounds

theWishlist

Dream gear to beg, borrow and steal for...

Hammett H161 'Slim Twin' Standard £3,750

CONTACT **Hammett Guitar Co** WEB **https://hammettguitarco.com** WORDS **Dave Burrluck** PHOTOGRAPHY **Olly Curtis**

Based in the Cotswolds, Pat Hammett draws his design inspiration from the 50s and 60s, and while that includes models such as his Razor, which is based on the perennial favourite, the Gibson Les Paul Junior, other builds draw on a lesser-known electrics, like the H620 Nazaré that's loosely based on the Maton Fyrbyrd, and the H470 Astro, a semi-solid inspired by the Harmony Stratotone. Our featured H161 'Slim Twin' Standard nods back to a Chicago blues favourite, the Kay 161 Twin Thin, "an authentic underdog revived and reworked for the modern guitarist", says Pat

But there's nothing bargain basement about the build here. It's very classily executed and is based on a 628mm (24.75-inch) scale length. The sealed hollow body, with bridge block, has a depth of 68mm (2.68 inches), uses solid maple steam-bent sides and flat rippled sycamore top and back, while the glued-in neck is quarter-sawn mahogany. It's light in weight, too, at 2.79kg (6.15lb) and all rather beautifully finished in nitro, lightly aged and full of character, and enhanced by the richly coloured vintage tortoiseshell plastic parts, including the smart Haramis control knobs.

But if the body harks back to that original design, the neck is beautifully crafted with a pretty thin depth – 18mm at the 1st fret, 22mm by the 12th – and has a shallow C profile. Many might prefer a bit more girth here, but as each guitar can be custom-ordered, that's easily done. However, there's excellent craft, not least the clean fretwork on the bound Gabon ebony fingerboard.

Along with the antique-looking hardware is the pair of Mojo single coils dragging us back in time. In combination with the flat-wound strings, these create a very old-school voicing that is beautifully 'jazz archtop' when clean, with snap and smoothness. They do great swinging rockabilly, too, and with a little grit or retro-fuzz they certainly nail earthy blues with a slightly microphonic edge. These are time-travel tones and hugely inspirational.

By design, the guitar harks back in time but with the sort of playability you'd expect from a much more contemporary instrument. Beautifully done!

1. 'Classy' and 'understated' describe this elegant lightly back-angled headstock with its small logo and large tortoiseshell truss rod cover. The nut is finely cut and the vintage-style tuners are from Kluson

2. Mojo's 'Hershey Bar' single coils aim to replicate the H44s found on the Harmony Stratotone, but Marc Ransley tells us, "Pat has all the pickups I make for him wound to a DeArmond Gold Foil spec, so they aren't really Hershey Bars, just Hershey Bar covers. They're single coils wound with super-thin 45 AWG wire and ceramic magnets." At output, the bridge measures 12.12k; the neck is 9.87k

1

2

3

3. Gretsch fans will recognise the bridge here, a Synchro-Sonic, first introduced in 1951. Each saddle can be intonated via those small thumb screws – no screwdrivers necessary. That very German-style 'harp' tailpiece (pictured below) is from ABM

4. "I started out making cigar-box guitars in 2011," says Pat. "I'd seen and heard players like Jack White and Dan Auerbach playing catalogue guitars, but I'd never seen one in the flesh. [When] I saw them at auction houses, they never seemed very good quality, usually falling apart. I knew the sounds, of course; blues was my forefront. So when I was train-hopping across America in my mid-20s I went to a secondhand music store in LA, Caveman [Vintage] Music, and they had a Silvertone 1429, a hollowbody single-cutaway with three Gold Foils. I bought that guitar and it really inspired me to go down this path of recreating golden era, retro-inspired Americana guitars... but ones that play in tune!"

5. Those classy Haramis knobs operate a simple circuit with individual volume controls and a master tone. You almost don't need the three-way toggle selector because with both pickups on you can simply shade your sounds from subtle adjustment of the volume controls

Gas Supply

Our pick of the month's most delectable and wallet-bothering new gear

Pre-NAMM releases From £32.99

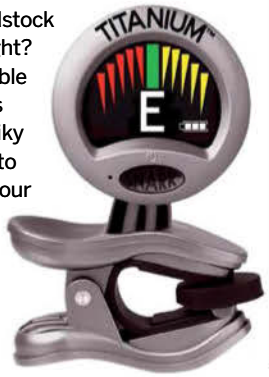
CONTACT **Various** WEB **See below**

Welcome to 2024 where, following a few years of slight disruption to our regular influx of new year releases, we now find ourselves in something of a NAMMdemic. By the time you read this, the world will once again have convened in Anaheim with a slew of new gear. We'll bring you a more detailed report next month, but, for now, here are some of the early-bird releases that have grabbed our attention. **[SW]**

HEADRUSH FRFR MKII **From £285**

If you haven't already, then 2024 might well be the year that you start seeing and hearing a lot more about full-range flat-response speaker cabs. HeadRush was one of the first in the sector, with its powered FRFR guitar cabinets designed to be a lightweight companion to your modeller or pedalboard preamp, and it's now upgraded them to MKII versions. There are two models to choose from: the compact 2,000-watt (peak) FRFR-108 MKII (£285), and 2,500-watt (peak) FRFR-112 MKII (£369; pictured). They're loaded with eight-inch or 12-inch drivers respectively; a one-inch ceramic compression driver takes care of the high-end. Both models have Bluetooth and weigh just 9.53kg (21lb) and 15.7kg (35lb) respectively.
www.headrushfx.com

SNARK ST-8 TITANIUM **£32.99**



You know the Snark – it's the long-running headstock tuner that surely can't be further reinvented, right? Wrong! The ST-8 Titanium features a rechargeable battery, but the bigger news is the Snark boffins have fitted it with its new Sound Shield. That spiky rubber bumper around the outside is designed to diffuse incoming ambient sound. It won't stop your drummer from whacking the snare while you tune, but it might well stop it from interfering. As with previous models, it features a bright display, battery level monitor and 360-degree rotation of the tuner section for easy viewing.
www.snarktuners.com

IBANEZ TS808 45TH ANNIVERSARY **£209**

The Ibanez Tube Screamer needs no introduction; we'd recognise that green game-changer anywhere... Hang on! Yes, Ibanez has reissued the TS808 for its 45th anniversary, but this time it comes in a sparkly Midnight Sapphire finish. Under the hood, there's the all-important JRC4558D chip, and Ibanez says the circuitry is the same as the original models. It's your classic Tube Screamer elsewhere, too, with Overdrive, Tone and Level controls, and that familiar square footswitch. These will be made in a limited production run, so we suggest pulling the trigger if you're tempted.
www.ibanez.com

MARTIN GPCE INCEPTION MAPLE **£4,150**

Martin has unveiled a brand-new electro-acoustic design, utilising a specially designed bracing system while keeping sustainability at the top of its brief. The GPCE Inception Maple is made from a combination of woods, including FSC-certified European spruce for the top, maple sides, and a three-piece back featuring maple and walnut. It's inside where things get really interesting, though, with a "skeletonised" scalloped bracing pattern, which is met by sonic channels to boost resonance and tone, both of which were created specifically for this guitar. It's an electro, courtesy of an LR Baggs Anthem system, and it comes with a hardshell case. We can't wait to put it through its paces!
www.martinguitar.com

LANEY AMPS, PLUG-IN & FRFR CAB **From $49**

Laney has been busy readying five releases. First are three Black Country Customs Ironheart amps (pictured top to bottom, above) available as the 30-watt IRT30-112 combo ($1,899), and 60-watt IRT60H ($2,199) and 120-watt IRT120H ($2,599) heads. They're three-channel, 6L6-loaded, with frequency-shifting pull-controls in the EQ circuit for finer tonal adjustments. Next, and a first for Laney, is its Ironheart-Plugin ($49), which sees the IRT circuit digitised and also plays host to digital versions of Laney's Steelpark and Monolith pedals, two Laney cab IRs and a suite of ambience and dynamics processors. Finally, the LFR-412 ($1,799), a FRFR 4x12 cabinet designed in collaboration with Devin Townsend, has output power rated at 2,600 watts, with four HH Black Series speakers, impulse responses, comprehensive connectivity and more.
www.laney.co.uk

ALSO OUT NOW...

FENDER 70TH ANNIVERSARY STRATOCASTER COLLECTION From £759

You might have heard, 70 years ago a chap named Leo Fender brought a promising electric guitar to the market. Fast-forward to today and Fender is kicking off 2024 with a celebration of the quintessential electric guitar. There's a trio of models, starting with the Player Stratocaster (£759, above left), which has been made available in an Anniversary 2-Color sunburst. This is joined by the 70th Anniversary Player Stratocaster (£959, above centre), which is loaded with Pure Vintage '59 single coils, a 241mm (9.5-inch) rosewood fingerboard and a two-point vibrato, and is finished in the subtle Nebula Noir finish. Finally, Fender has dolled-up its American Professional II Stratocaster in a 70th Anniversary edition (£2,169, above right). All the regular American Pro II features are here – deep C neck profile, contoured heel, push-push tone control – but Fender has outfitted it with some anniversary touches including a flame maple-over-alder body in Comet Burst, 70th Anniversary V-Mod II pickups and a commemorative neckplate.
www.fender.com

KEMPER PROFILER PLAYER £619

The longtime wishlist of many Kemper fans is likely topped by a pedalboard-friendly profiler. Well, the wait is now over as Kemper has lifted the lid on its Profiler Player. This pedal-based Profiler can load any existing amp profile (including Kemper's latest Liquid Profiles), as well as offering four effects slots (two pre-amp, two post-amp), which are populated from the included 136 effects slots. There's plenty of hands-on control, with a three-band EQ, noise gate, Effect and Level controls, plus the three footswitches are assignable. Onboard Bluetooth allows for connection to your phone where you can build and organise your rigs via Kemper's Rig Manager app, and the connectivity continues on the back with a guitar input, stereo outputs (plus an XLR out), headphone output, dual-USB sockets, and an expression pedal input. It's shipping now.
www.kemper-amps.com

Fretbuzz

A monthly look at must-hear artists from all corners of the guitar world, from the roots of their sound to the tracks that matter most

Artist: Tenille Townes

Album: Train Track Worktapes (EP; Sony Music)

Train Tracks Worktapes is an EP that features five songs, including a cover of Fleetwood Mac's *Landslide*
www.tenilletownes.com

Tenille Townes has been on the country music scene for many years, steadily gathering a fanbase and releasing music with her first collection, *Real*, dropping in 2011. 2022's mini-album, *Masquerades*, saw a new side to her songwriting. "I've always enjoyed songwriting from the storyteller's perspective," Tenille says. "The pandemic forced a period of self-reflection, so I couldn't help that the songs were more personal." Her current EP, *Train Track Worktapes*, was created on the road across Canada, where she was born and raised.

Breaking Out

Tenille's breakout album, 2020's *The Lemonade Stand*, started the shift in focus from a 'birdseye view', which she previously used, to a more introspective bent; a transition that took some getting used to. "I wrote *Villain In Me* and it was the scariest thing to share a song about wearing a brave face but struggling underneath with the inner critic and doubt," Tenille admits. "I posted a clip online and felt encouraged by people feeling the same way and knowing the feeling of sometimes hiding behind a smile. It gave me courage to continue working on the songs that became *Masquerades*; I couldn't be happier with that collection."

In The Beginning

"My grandparents got my first guitar when I was 14," Tenille says. "I figured out a couple of chords and started pairing them with pages from my journal. I remember thinking I could figure out how to write songs and it just opened up a universe of possibilities. It was a way of sharing these stories with other people and that's what made me fall in love with the road.

"I graduated from high school and went out on this school tour where I travelled across Canada for 32 weeks. It was sort of a pitch to my dad that I wasn't going to college and was serious about music. I loved living on the road. At the end of the tour, I decided to drive to Nashville and focus on the creative side of things, and figure how to get back on the road in a real way."

Train Track Worktapes

Tenille's most recent project, the *Train Track Worktapes* EP, was recorded while travelling by rail across Canada. "We did this tour where we lived on a train for 15 days and played 65 shows in all of these communities from Montreal to Calgary," she explains. "The boxcar was a stage, and we would pull into towns that don't get live music very often, then we'd step out onto the stage and play. The shows were free, but there was a suggested donation that went to the local food bank.

"It was so cold! The resilience of the crowd made me so proud to be Canadian. I loved that adventure and was inspired to write a journal. Once there were a few songs we set up a jam area and started playing them."

Life on the tracks: Tenille's latest EP was created on tour, travelling by train across Canada for a set of charity gigs

In The Picture

When it came to recording *Train Track Worktapes* over the 3,000-mile journey, Tenille kept it simple. "I have a Martin OM-28 guitar painted with symbols and lyrics from *Masquerades* [pictured left]. I've had it since 2020; I got it new. I had a vintage 000 that I got in Austin and it didn't have a truss rod and was hard to tour with because it didn't stay in tune. So when I was making new music I got this guitar." **[GK]**

Standout track: *Wheels*
For fans of: Carly Pearce, Little Big Town, Colter Wall

RIDING THE RAILS

Tenille keeps it real, valuing authenticity in her music

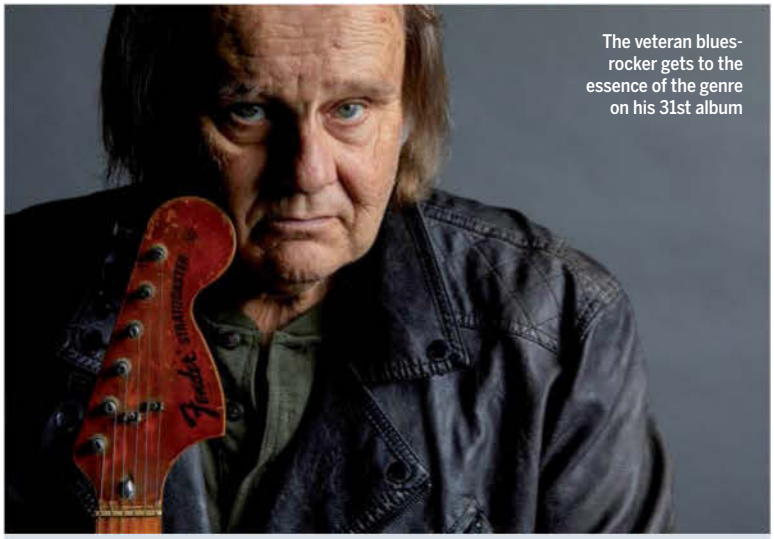
Sharing music is key to Tenille's outlook and is what inspired the railroad trip. The EP is a natural companion to that tour, with the music left unadorned and in its true state. "Often in music you lose the human element when you're trying to chase [perfection]," Tenille says. "I'm trying to remind myself of that for when we do the next one. Although it won't be on a train in motion, I still want to capture the essence of it feeling real; it's the most important thing and very much in the driving seat of what motivates me."

PHOTO BY LINDSEY BLAME

THE LINEUP

Albums

The month's best guitar music – a hand-picked selection of the finest fretwork on wax



The veteran blues-rocker gets to the essence of the genre on his 31st album

PHOTO BY LELAND HAYWARD

Walter Trout

Broken

Provogue/Mascot Label Group (release date: 1 March)

9/10

With health problems now firmly behind him, the unbreakable blues master returns

If anyone deserves the epithet 'veteran bluesman' here in the 21st century, it's Walter Trout. He's been an essential part of the blues-rock scene for more than five decades since serving his apprenticeship by accompanying John Lee Hooker, Big Mama Thornton and Joe Tex, among others, way back in the 1970s. Stints with Canned Heat and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers rounded off Walter's blues education and since then he has been one of the most prolific artists on the scene. *Broken* – his 31st album – sees Walter joined on a couple of tracks by Beth Hart and Twisted Sister's Dee Snider, the latter seeming a strange choice, but trust us, it works! "Dee [...] put up a live cut of me on his Twitter [page] and said: 'Listen to this fucking guitar hero.' We started talking and became friends," Walter tells us.

The album kicks off with the title track, Walter duetting with Beth Hart on a soul-wrenching blues decorated throughout with Walter's signature high-octane Strat licks. In contrast, the second track, *Turn And Walk Away*, begins with some nice country blues acoustic, before the band joins in for a superb slow-burn blues ballad.

Thematically, *Broken* orbits around Walter's philosophy that "all of us are broken, but no-one is beyond repair..." and deals with current day "bitter schisms of modern life" and "refuses to succumb to them". But this is the stuff of blues and it always has been – and Walter delivers on his promise of no-holds-barred blues-rock throughout and, as such, *Broken* shines as one of his best outings yet. **[DM]**

Standout track: *No Magic (In The Street)*
For fans of: Bernie Marsden, Joe Bonamassa, Dan Patlansky

Bruce Soord

Luminescence

Kscope (available now)

9/10

Cult prog legend releases new solo outing

Pineapple Thief fans will be delighted in this new third solo album by Bruce Soord. There's a specific unity to the 12 tracks, musically and sonically, focusing on vocal clarity and involving instrumentation that covers strings, keys, bass and percussion. On top of this is well-placed acoustic guitar that is sympathetically played and often well effected with lush, deep reverbs. Opener, *Dear Life*, is quite an earworm with hypnotic guitar picking, smooth chord changes and an expressive vocal performance. *Olomouc* is more sparse with spacey rhythmic guitar chords and nicely tracked vocals. The laid-back *Never Ending Light* features tremolo electric piano, guitar harmonics, echo-enriched electric guitar and a smooth string arrangement, while the light strumming of *Instant Flash Of Light* hints as much towards 70s acoustic rock as later UK bands such as Echo And The Bunnymen, Tears For Fears or solo performers like Nick Harper. An album that rewards on repeat listenings for those after a lush chill vibe. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Never Ending Light*
For fans of: Pineapple Thief, Porcupine Tree, Steven Wilson

Gallagher/Squire

Gallagher/Squire

Parlophone (release date: 1 March)

9/10

Ebullient debut leaves you wondering why they didn't get together sooner

Like two boxers who make such an unexpected match-up that you wonder who on earth will win, the pairing of Liam Gallagher with John Squire could have gone so many ways, including wrong. Thankfully, Squire's taciturn but stinging guitar style and Gallagher's vee-sign flicking exuberance click together so well you wonder why they left it so long. Opener, *Raise Your Hands*, has an irresistible optimism that's given momentum by the perfect timing of Squire's hooks – it really feels like both men threw the windows open and let light and life into this record. Deft nods to *Axis: Bold As Love* can be heard on the anthemic *Just Another Rainbow*, while *I'm A Wheel* has the grit and grind of vintage John Mayall. It's quality throughout. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Just Another Rainbow*
For fans of: Oasis, Stone Roses, Jimi Hendrix, The Beatles

Emily's third album rocks from the off

PHOTO BY JAMIE GOODSELL

Emily Wolfe

The Blowback

Crows Feet Records (available now)

8/10

Stomping singer and guitarist hits solo hot spot

With *The Blowback* being her third solo album, Emily Wolfe is a commanding singer/guitarist with 10 new songs that are high on energy and propulsion. *Silencer* is uptempo and rocking, and a great pick as a single. *Dead End Luck* is a mid-tempo stomper with a strong guitar hook, pounding drums and a driven vocal performance. *Walk In My Shoes* evokes the groove rock that Sheryl Crow is so good at; here, Emily relishes with fuzzed out bass/guitar, ear-catching guitar licks and a jaunty disco/reggae/rock rhythm. Fuzz bass and driving drums empower *Road To Ruin*, while the laid-back *Rock Bottom On A High Wire* provides a good dynamic change. Closer, *Can I Read Your Mind, Lover*, includes throbbing 70s sequential synth rhythms and evocative 80s-esque chorus chord chimes. Rocking and vibrant for sure! **[JS]**

Standout track: *Road To Ruin*
For fans of: Sheryl Crow, Larkin Poe

Richard Thompson

Live In Nottingham 1986

Store For Music (available now)

8/10

Classic concert available on CD for the first time

This double-CD set, recorded at Nottingham's Rock City in November 1986, has been languishing in the archives undiscovered for several decades and brought to the light at last with this release. Accompanied by his band at the time, which comprised Christine Collister (vocals/acoustic guitar), Gerry Conway (drums), Clive Gregson (guitar/vocals) and Rory McFarlane (bass), it colours in Richard Thompson's 80s post-Fairport solo career with vivid hues. Classic songs like *Shoot Out The Lights*, *She Twists The Knife Again* and *Tear Stained Letter* sit alongside others such as *Did She Jump Or Was She Pushed* and *Love In A Faithless Country*, all given that extra inspired push that only live performance can produce. Thompson's wiry guitar sound weaves in and out of every track, reaffirming his position as one of the most influential folk-rock guitarists this country has produced. A classic. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Shoot Out The Lights*
For fans of: Fairport Convention, Fotheringay

THE LINEUP

Tones Behind The Tracks

Having recently barnstormed his way through the UK on tour, **Philip Sayce**'s long-awaited new album is finally set for release

Artist: Philip Sayce

Album: The Wolves Are Coming (Atomic Gemini/Forty Below Records)

The new album revisits Sayce's scorching Strat tones and volatile riffs

After the release of his seventh solo record, *Spirit Rising*, in 2020, Philip Sayce took to the internet to promote it in lieu of being able to play live during the pandemic. Incredibly, and in no doubt due to a very faithful fanbase, the album received more than 13 million streams on Spotify. Now, with business relatively back to normal, Philip's return to the live stage finds him at the top of his game. Furthermore, a new studio album waits in the wings. We took the opportunity to chat with him via a Zoom call to his home in LA to find out what went into the making of *The Wolves Are Coming*.

The writing for the new album would have been during the Covid era. How did you organise your time?

"It was definitely an opportunity to pause and regroup, take stock and really work my ass off during lockdown. I just said, 'There's nothing going on. There's no live shows happening. Everything is on hold. So I'm going to plan out my day accordingly: I'm going to take three hours in the morning to practise, then I'm going to do a couple hours in the afternoon of writing, then I'm going to come back and practise a little more.' I just pushed myself to train and use the time as focused practice."

Did you have material written prior to that or did you start writing with a clean slate?

"You know, both are true. Some ideas had been started some time ago and maybe not finished. During the pandemic I had time to go through the old sock drawer and see what was in there. Occasionally, I'd find something that was like, 'Well, how come I never worked on that one?' And then I sort of reworked it and brought it into life. Other things were totally brand-new ideas."

What is your writing process – does it start with a riff or some kind of melodic idea?

"I try not to go by any rules – and that's one of the things I love about music and the arts in general. A lot of times it's a case of 'choose your own adventure', really; you're improvising in the moment. So I think I don't necessarily have a one-size-fits-all approach. However, that being said, most times, I'll come up with some type of a riff or a chord progression and hear a melody over it. Then I'll hum it into my phone and keep it as an idea. I'll title it, you know, whatever I'm going to call it for that particular day, and then come back to it, if I don't finish it in the moment."

The influence of classic rock from the mid-70s era abounds on the latest CD

PHOTO BY LINDA MCDERMOTT

Listening to the new album, we're hearing classic rock era influences – Robin Trower, Hendrix, Zeppelin...

"Oh, yeah. Let's say Robin Trower, for instance. When I hear live recordings of those guys in the mid-70s, or even around the *Bridge Of Sighs* era, [it's like] there's something about the earth under my feet moving. It's breathing. It's like, something is very moving about the expression and the intention in that music. And, regardless, if it's something that I like or not, there's something that happens to me, when I hear those artists you just mentioned – I mentioned Trower, but all of them – it's like a chest is heaving, something is moving when that music is on. So yeah, I'm trying to take a page out of that book."

What gear did you take into the studio with you this time?

"The amps were my favourite [Fender] Super Reverb, which I've had for many years, and a couple of others: a César Diaz and some Tommy Cougar amps.

PHOTO BY MATT BARNES

"I try not to go by any rules – and that's one of the things I love about music"

Philip Sayce

Sayce took a range of amps into the studio to record *The Wolves Are Coming*, sometimes combining two or three together to get the sound he was searching for

Sayce's love of Strats came from hearing his parents playing Clapton, Knopfler, SRV and Ry Cooder albums in the house when he was a child

It'd be changing daily for whatever session we were in: 'Let's try this, this time...' or, 'Let's pair these two or three together.'

"It was mostly three guitars, so it would have been either one of my '63 Stratocasters and then I also have a mid-60s Gibson SG Junior, which I used quite a bit. Then I used a Mule resonator on a couple of tracks. A Fender Vibratone, or Lesley, on a couple of things, obviously – you know, hearing that great sound Stevie Ray had when he used those and trying to get a little of that flavour in there. And the same pedals that I use in a live setting: old Fuzz Faces or old wah-wah pedals or César Diaz pedals."

"When I hear those live [70s] recordings, [it's like] there's something about the earth under my feet moving... I'm trying to take a page out of that book"

When you made the album, did you record 'live' with the band in the studio?

"Yeah, my approach is to record as live as possible to try to capture the excitement of that moment – and before you've played it 30 times, you know? You want to get it before you've overdone it. Sometimes, in the first few takes there's an excitement and a charge, like, 'Wait a minute, what's the next chord?' It has to have an energy about it and so I try to be mindful of that type of approach. Sometimes the song requires being done 30, 40 times – it depends on the particular track. But for the most part, approaching things from a live and human standpoint is what I enjoy in the studio.

"*The Wolves Are Coming* was recorded in a number of different sessions. Due to the pandemic, we would go in for two or three days at a time. 'Okay, great, what did we get? We got three songs in three days this time. Okay, good. Are they all gonna make it? Two of the three are good. Okay, cool. Maybe I need to rewrite that lyric, you know, or rewrite a bridge.'

"I would go in with Mike Leasure to play drums; he's a dear friend and a phenomenal drummer. He's been playing with Walter Trout for the last 15 years or something. But he and I go back a long time and we've played a lot of shows together. So he came into the studio, just the two of us on the floor recording live, and Mark Rains was our engineer. We recorded stuff live, then I went back and overdubbed bass, and then we would overdub some vocals and whatever else needed to be done, but the core of the music was done live."

Do you use your SG Junior live?

"Yeah, I have used it live. I've had that guitar for many, many years. But I don't bring it out as much as the Strats or the Paul Reed Smith Silver Sky that I've been playing. The reason for that is the Strats – or Strat-style guitars – are a little tougher. When those Gibsons fall down, those headstocks come off, and I don't want to see that happen."

PHOTO BY ALEX ENGLISH

PHOTO BY MATT BARNES

Amidst the '63 Strats, a mid-60s Gibson SG Junior was sometimes called into action on the new album

What was the attraction to the Strat in the first place?

"It came from my parents. Growing up and hearing my parents' music collection and watching videos and dancing around the house playing air guitar on a tennis racket... It was Eric Clapton, Mark Knopfler, Ry Cooder, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Jeff Healey and Buddy Guy and all of these players. It was really the soundtrack of what I heard growing up, and so I naturally gravitated towards a Strat because my main influences were all playing them."

Are your Strats stock or have you had any work done on them?

"For the most part, they're stock. I do a few things to them – not myself because I am a bit of a Neanderthal when it comes to guitar work, but I can do basic things. I usually get the frets changed out for some larger ones, but, other than that, it's all just personal taste in terms of adjusting the height of the pickups and so on. I like to keep the original pickups on the old guitars, if they sound good. It's really frets that are the main thing."

Do you still have the three-way switches on your 60s Strats or have you fitted five-way pickup selectors?

"I've upgraded them to five-way. On my Strat that's called 'Big Daddy', I put in a five-way last year as the three-way was starting to get a little worn out. I'm very, very picky; I want all three [pickups] to be just right. I don't want to cringe if I go to any of them. I want them to all be so that I could land on any of them and feel real good about it. Or feel inspired by the sound. That being said, I'm usually a neck pickup guy, I think, right?"

> "I'm very picky; I want all three [pickups] to be just right. I don't want to cringe... I want to feel inspired by the sound"

Are you looking forward to more live work to promote the new album?

"We just got home from a tour through the UK, which was awesome. We had a good time. It was such a pleasure and a privilege to have the opportunity to return to the UK to perform. It had been a while. So we are in the process of booking our return dates. The album comes out at the end of February. I mean, I'll be practising every day, irritating my neighbours! But, other than that, we'll be getting going in the first quarter of the year – I think [there are] some European dates, May into June, and then we'll be back over in the UK for a tour later." **[DM]**

The Wolves Are Coming is out on 23 February on Atomic Gemini/Forty Below Records

www.philipsayce.com

NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE

Unsung Stars Of Music

Neville Marten recounts an evening performing to some of the UK's most successful songwriters and the pre-show anxiety that can occur!

One of the interesting things about playing in the band of someone well known, as I have been fortunate enough to do for many years, is that occasionally we get to do a special gig. Take December of last year. Marty Wilde is a member of the SODS, or Songwriters Of Distinction Society. He wrote or co-wrote a number of hit singles including: Status Quo's *Ice In The Sun*; *I'm A Tiger* for Lulu; his daughter Kim's *Kids In America*, *Cambodia* and others; as well as *Jesamine* by The Casuals, which was only held off the top spot by The Beatles' *Hey Jude*.

"Tony Hatch singing *Downtown*, Justin Hayward playing *Question*, and Graham Gouldman doing *I'm Not In Love* were the tip of a star-studded iceberg"

Marty asked his keyboard player, Adrian, and me to join him at the SODS event at London's Landmark hotel. We were to perform just two numbers, since other SODS in attendance would also be doing a song or two that they'd composed. When I tell you that Tony Hatch singing *Downtown*, Justin Hayward (with Mike Dawes on second guitar) playing *Question*, and Graham Gouldman doing an acoustic guitar rendition of *I'm Not In Love* were just the tip of a star-studded iceberg, you'll see what I mean. Others there that night included comic Jimmy Tarbuck, guitarists Joe Brown and Bruce Welch, Spandau's Gary Kemp, David Arnold (he of several *Bond* scores), Mitch Murray (Gerry And The Pacemakers and Freddie And The Dreamers' biggest hits), as well as Gary Osborne (who co-wrote *Part-Time Love* and *Blue Eyes* with Elton John).

We were on last and played *Jesamine* and *Teenager In Love*. I used my Gibson Hummingbird and it seemed Gibbo dreads were *de rigueur* that night as almost everyone else played J-45s. There was a pink Hummingbird and a Southern Jumbo, too. Otherwise, it was Justin's Guild F-512 12-string, Marty's and Graham Gouldman's Atkins, and Mike Dawes on his German-built Andreas Cuntz.

Since we had keyboards, two acoustics and three-part harmony we made the biggest noise of the evening, and Marty received a standing ovation from his illustrious admirers. It was a great night and a great memory – as these really are the music world's unsung heroes.

Nothing But A Dreamer

I have suffered performance anxiety on a few occasions, usually when I know there's some amazing guitarist in the audience. It happened once with Gary Moore, another time with Albert Lee, and then when demoing the SynthAxe in front of Allan Holdsworth, Lee Ritenour and Stanley Jordan. There was also the time that Bruce Welch and Hank Marvin came to one of our shows. Usually, though, the stage doesn't particularly unnerve me.

Now, I can't comment on whether plumbers have bad dreams about a massive leak that they can't stem, hairdressers that keep levelling up each side until the customer is bald, or bus drivers in charge of a vehicle whose brakes have failed and they are heading inexorably towards a cliff's edge. But I don't know of a single gigging muso that doesn't have recurring nightmares about their jobs.

My most frequent one is that the band have all arrived in plenty of time at a rather prestigious venue for a particularly important show. We're all backstage chatting and having a drink, when all of a sudden it's time to go on. Only then do I realise I haven't even set my gear up, have no idea where my clothes are or my guitar, and I'm going to let everyone down. It's horrible. Another one is that I'm either on stage actually playing, or just walking up to take my place, when I notice I'm stark naked. And once, I was driving from where I lived near Newmarket over to Ely to play the lead role in a big musical that was premiering that night. I was about five minutes from the venue when it suddenly dawned on me that I hadn't learned a single lyric, and I sang the opening number. Talk about waking up in a sweat!

Do you suffer the occasional gig dream? If so, we'd love to hear it. See you next month.

GAS OF THE MONTH

Power Of 12

What? Guild F-1512E Westerly 12-String
Where seen? gak.co.uk **Price?** £935

American-made Guild 12-strings run at way over three grand these days, but, inspired by Justin Hayward's beautiful vintage blonde model, I looked online and this Chinese-built Westerly Jumbo looks like a bargain at a third of that. With a solid spruce top and solid Indian rosewood back and sides, it also comes with a dot-inlaid rosewood fingerboard, bone nut and saddle, pearl soundhole rosette, and the ever-faithful Fishman Sonitone pickup. Everyone should have a 12-string, and this one looks as strong a contender as any. Spraaaaang!

Knock On Wood

Alex Bishop finds he cannot resist temptation and restocks his timber supplies with piles of maple and London plane

Let's make this clear from the outset: I am a wood addict, a self-confessed 'dendrophile'. 13 years of guitar making has made me this way compounded by an already unhealthy addiction to playing and collecting guitars, so maybe you'll be able to relate to my obsession with hoarding timber, too.

As someone who runs two businesses, both making guitars and teaching lutherie, keeping a healthy stock of materials is essential. However, it also gives me a reason to compulsively empty my bank account on a whim every time an opportunity to acquire wood presents itself. Such an event occurred not once but *three* times this month, one of which happened when I was contacted out of the blue by my old design and technology teacher from secondary school, offering some slabs of maple for a price that we both knew I wasn't going to resist.

I'm not normally a huge fan of maple for back and sides in acoustic-guitar making, since the bright effect on tone is not something I'm particularly into: it's great for the glassy sound of a slide guitar and a go-to tonewood for a jazz archtop, but the scooped low-end is little 'nasal' for my usual tastes. That said, it's not just my ears that I'm trying to impress but my customers', and besides I'm always excited to navigate the tonal offerings of an interesting piece of timber. So, together we unloaded the boards into my workshop ready for processing into backs and sides (known as 'resawing').

Before I could even think about firing up the bandsaw, my phone flashed up with a call from my friend Nick, a bass player with whom I had suffered a torrential downpour at a wedding gig the weekend before. We had been taking shelter in an abandoned gazebo when the subject of trees came up, and he shared with me that he was trying to shift a few slabs of decades-old London plane. After the call I agreed to buy it, the gig fee bypassing me completely straight into Nick's account. On the upside, I was now the custodian of the better half of a London plane tree trunk that I later discovered was (inconveniently) longer than my car...

Slice Of The Action

When dealing with large slabs of timber for instrument making, the first challenge is to decide how to cut it all up. Is the piece appropriate for cutting backs and sides, or would it make better neck blanks? I didn't want to pass up the opportunity to get a few sets of backs and sides from the London plane, but looking at the size of the billet I felt that I was going to do well to cut mostly neck blanks out of it. My suspicion was that this was going to have similar properties to maple (London plane is a hybridised form of sycamore, a type of maple) – strong and straight, ideal for supporting the pull of steel string but with the fine filigree of grain lines characteristic of its pseudonym 'lacewood'.

Most of the maple was just a little too slight for neck blanks, so I would need to slice this up into backs and sides, requiring particularly deep, long cuts. By using two pieces of matching wood to form the back of an acoustic guitar, some of the strain is taken out, but the hardest part is keeping the blade cutting straight. The attractive but wobbly grain of flamed maple tends to deflect the blade back and forth, potentially resulting in a wonky cut, creating more waste and less wood – not ideal when trying to maximise the yield from a large (and expensive) slab of wood.

> "It's not just my ears I'm trying to impress but my customers'. I'm always excited to navigate the tonal offerings of an interesting piece of timber"

Once I had equipped my bandsaw with a fresh blade and tuned it up, I was confident I was finally ready to go. As my finger hovered over the 'start' button, my phone beeped for my attention: it was an email from one of my university tutors asking if I was interested in buying some logs of spruce. Purchased back in 1977, these old-growth quartered logs were now surplus to requirements and were now looking for a good home. Well... it would be rude not to, wouldn't it?

www.youtube.com/@alexbishopguitars

Once the excitement of procuring a new piece of timber has waned slightly, Alex has to decide on its purpose and therefore how to cut it up

PHOTO BY BARBORA CETLOVA

Attachment Theory

The guitar world has no shortage of 'holy grails' or 'sacred cows' and the acoustic neck joint remains an area of contention, says **Huw Price**

It's hard to pinpoint the time when the belief that glue is good and bolts are bad took hold. The cynic in me might suggest that it was instigated, or at least propagated, by some traditionally minded guitar manufacturers in response to a Californian company that sent shockwaves through the industry in the early 1950s. By the 1970s, sustain worshippers were even making the case for dispensing with neck joints altogether and making guitars from continuous lengths of wood. The main beneficiaries of this simplistic thinking were Fender fans, who could pick up vintage examples of their beloved instruments for next to nothing.

Even if you buy into the argument that glued necks offer superior sustain, it's harder to make the case for superior tone. This is obviously the case with electric guitars, since the pickups and hardware have such a profound impact on the overall sound of the guitar. But try comparing the unplugged tonal qualities and sustain of a 50s-style lightweight swamp ash Telecaster with a leaden Les Paul Custom from the 1970s, and an unbiased ear might conclude that the former wins on both counts. The question is whether these findings also apply to acoustic guitars.

Dovetailing

For decades the dovetail joint was by far the most common method of uniting bodies and necks. Many of the earliest guitars were made by luthiers with a background in violin, viola and cello building, so dovetail neck joints carried over to guitars – outside Spain, at least. Heritage manufacturers, including Martin, Lowden and Gibson, still use traditional dovetails for high-end vintage-inspired models.

The recess in the neck block and the dovetail itself are both angled along their mating surfaces. When the joint is accurately cut and adjusted, pressing the neck into the block actually pulls the heel tightly against the body. Glue is applied to make this firm friction fit permanent when the neck and body are joined. Dovetail proponents argue the tight physical contact promotes tone transfer between the neck and body, so they both resonate 'as one'. To facilitate this tone transfer, glues that set crystal hard, such as Titebond Original aliphatic resin and traditional hot hide glue, are also advocated.

While glued dovetails can remain structurally sound for several decades, almost every acoustic will require a neck reset eventually. This may be because the glue starts to fail and a gap opens up between the heel and body. It can also be because string tension has deformed the body and the guitar's geometry needs correcting. Either way, a neck reset becomes unavoidable when the action becomes excessively high and there's insufficient saddle height to compensate. Martin always factored this into its builds by finishing necks and bodies separately.

But resetting a glued-in neck is a skilled process that can require finish touch-ups and expense for the owner. Many guitars are sent back to the original manufacturer for neck resets, and some may even be done under warranty. Eventually, guitar builders started considering alternative neck attachment methods that would simplify the reset process and minimise the risk of damaging the finish without any compromise in tone.

This more modern, simplified version of the traditional dovetail joint (pictured on a Martin DCPA4 Shaded model) still uses glue to unite the body and neck for a firm hold

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

Glueless

For many modern acoustic guitar manufacturers, the ideal neck joint would be quick to set and reset, and offer equivalent or even superior sonic qualities to traditional dovetails. And that's precisely what companies as diverse as Taylor, Bourgeois, Collings, Atkin, Taran and Furch have set out to achieve – albeit in individual ways. And yes, they're all using bolts to secure glueless joints.

Of all the factors generally considered crucial to bodies and necks resonating 'as one', contact area and joint tightness generally top the list. A well-executed dovetail certainly creates a tight bond, but the mating surfaces are actually quite small.

Bolt-on neck attachment means that the builder doesn't have to rely on the joint itself to achieve the bond. Consequently, the mating surfaces can be larger and torqued metal bolts can exert far more pressure than wedging two pieces of wood together. Some manufacturers, such as Taylor, even attach the fretboard extension using bolts, but others prefer glue.

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

Our recent visit to the Furch factory provided an introduction to its CNR (Composite Neck Reinforcement) System, a cutting-edge example of modern acoustic guitar construction. It includes a cast 'L' shaped aluminium alloy part that's tightly set into a CNC-routed recess in the heel. This part is also tapped for bolts. According to Furch's Martin Kondelčík, "the casting weighs just 66 grams and the thinking was to have the heel as thin as possible for players who use higher positions on the neck to have a greater level of comfort". The solidity of the bracket also allows Furch to use a far smaller neck block, which allows the soundboard around that area to resonate more freely. And on the very rare occasion that a Furch needs a neck reset, it takes about 15 minutes.

Furch's innovative CNR System involves casing the truss road in lightweight carbon and also using a aluminium alloy casting – this allows the neck wood to behave in a predictable manner and enables a precise neck setup

"For many modern manufacturers, the ideal neck joint would offer equivalent or superior sonic qualities to traditional dovetails"

Joint Efforts

When researching this article, I read several advocates of the traditional dovetail trotting out the "only metal parts that belong on an acoustic guitar are the strings" trope. If that's the case, then I'd suggest commissioning a steel-string acoustic built with no truss rod or fretwire, and wooden friction pegs instead of tuners, and see how that works out...

It's surely implausible that the majority of the world's finest acoustic guitar manufacturers would knowingly be making inferior-sounding instruments simply to streamline neck resets. Granted, hand-fitting necks with dovetails and animal-protein glue has a certain romance, and it's a thing of beauty for anyone building a handful of guitars per month. But CNC-routing equipment and well-crafted bolted joints offer consistent quality and all the other benefits for larger manufacturers who don't have the luxury of time.

Of all the construction methods separating great-sounding acoustic guitars from ordinary ones, the evidence suggests that having a glued or bolted neck should no longer be considered a deciding factor. G

THREE TO GET READY

Innovative neck joints to audition

Furch Yellow Deluxe GC-CR €2,928

Furch's CNR neck design as found on this GC-CR offers a dual-action truss rod. But it does so by using a lightweight carbon casing that surrounds the truss rod along its entire length. Furch claims this increases resistance to neck deformations by 90 per cent, and because of the strong rigidity, there's no need for additional reinforcement, meaning the whole system only adds just under 30 grams – compared with common truss rod systems – to the weight of the guitar.

Martin SC-10E £1,375 (sapele); £999 (maple)

The Martin SC series makes use of a couple of neck joint features to radically improve upper-fret access. First, there's an internal block containing a two-way truss rod, but it also includes Martin's linear dovetail joint. Externally, the heel is scooped and works in conjunction with the deep cutaway and neck barrel to remove the physical barrier of a traditional heel.

Taylor American Dream AD17 £2,375

Taylor's bolt-on neck design not only promises complete vibration transfer (it actually boasts that it's better than glued necks), but it also allows the neck angle to be set – and reset over time – by someone who knows what they're doing. That's because the glueless design means the neck can easily be removed, and using Taylor's neck-angle spacers, you can get the best performance from your guitar throughout its life.

AUDIO ▶ http://bit.ly/guitaristextra

Rock 'n' Roll Endings

Richard Barrett gathers some jazz-influenced rock 'n' roll chords to enliven your vocabulary

When rock 'n' roll was being invented, the guitars used were often the hollowbodies that were originally designed for jazz – just check out early photos of Scotty Moore, Chuck Berry and, of course, Eddie Cochran. In many cases, the harmonic sophistication of jazz found its way into some guitar parts and solos, too, which you'll hear on the early Elvis recordings, plus Bill Haley's *Rock Around The Clock*. Brian Setzer is a great example of a more contemporary player who clearly has a good knowledge of his jazz voicings, as evidenced on *Stray Cat Strut* or his version of *Route 66* with The Brian Setzer Orchestra.

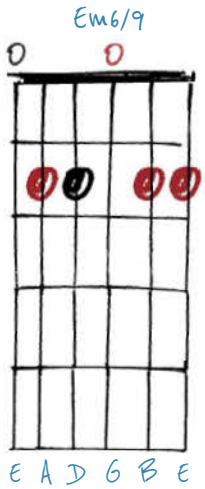
We're not getting quite that complicated here, but these voicings certainly give you some nice options. While they don't have to be exclusively 'ending' chords, this is a fun way to incorporate them into your vocabulary. As ever, close attention to their content can also give ideas for single-note lines or patterns where you might rake across a chord/triad as part of a solo. G

PHOTO BY TONY NELSON/GUITAR PLAYER MAGAZINE

Listen carefully and you'll hear how Brian Setzer brings jazz voicings into his rock 'n' roll licks

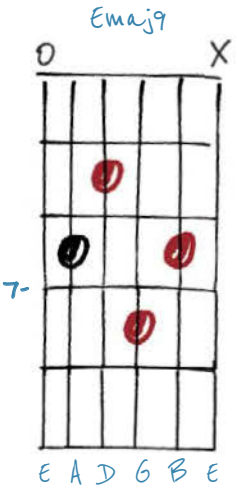
Example 1

This Em6/9 is so called because is contains the 6th (C#) and the 9th (F#). If only chord extensions could always be this simple! Actually, some may wish to call this Em6(add9). This would technically be correct, as there is no 7th, but you'll find most chord charts will abbreviate where possible.



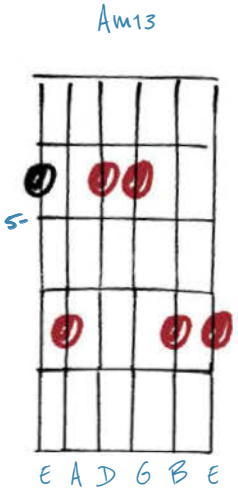
Example 2

This Emaj9 is, of course, a major chord, courtesy of the G# that appears on the fourth string. But the 'maj' part of the name actually refers to the major 7th (D#), which appears on the third string. Generally, chords are presumed to be major unless stated otherwise.



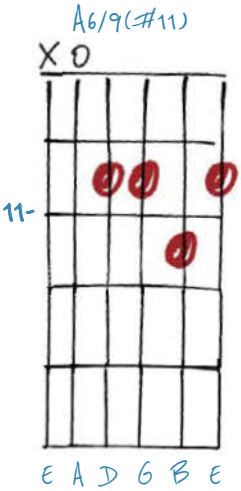
Example 3

This Am13 is a handful – and takes some explaining. It's very similar in structure to Ex 1's chord, but you'll find a G, the dominant (or flat) 7th on the fourth string. This means we should see the F# on the second string as the 13th (not the 6th), and the 9th (B) on the first string is now a default part of the 13th chord, rather than needing to be specified!



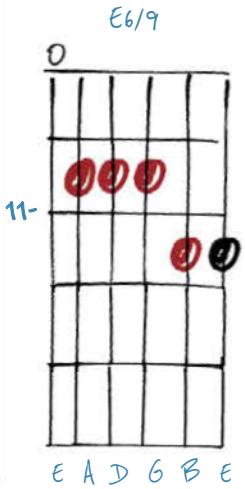
Example 4

This A6/9(#11) uses the open fifth string as its root; you can omit this to play it in any other key. There is no dominant 7th and yet we have referred to the #11 (on the first string), which would normally require that... This convention avoids having to say A6♭5add9, which suggests a very different voicing/feel with the ♭5 buried in the chord.



Example 5

One of the nicest ending chords of all, this E6/9 is also short for E6(add9), but it's worth knowing this abbreviated name. You could use the 11th fret of the first string (instead of the 12th shown here) to incorporate a maj7th. The abbreviated name for this would be Emaj69.



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STAR LETTER

VALVE PRESSURE?

Interesting comment made in issue 506 in the article The Future Of Valves. The writer says: "Valves wear out, while DSPs don't" and while that's technically true, it's more than a little misleading. Valves do wear out, but if looked after properly, avoiding physical shocks when hot or warm, not only can they last many years, but they usually give notice before failure. They can become noisy or microphonic or simply lose gain. But the good news is, if available, valves can be easy to change, even by the user. Conversely, DSPs don't wear out, but they do die. And there's the rub.

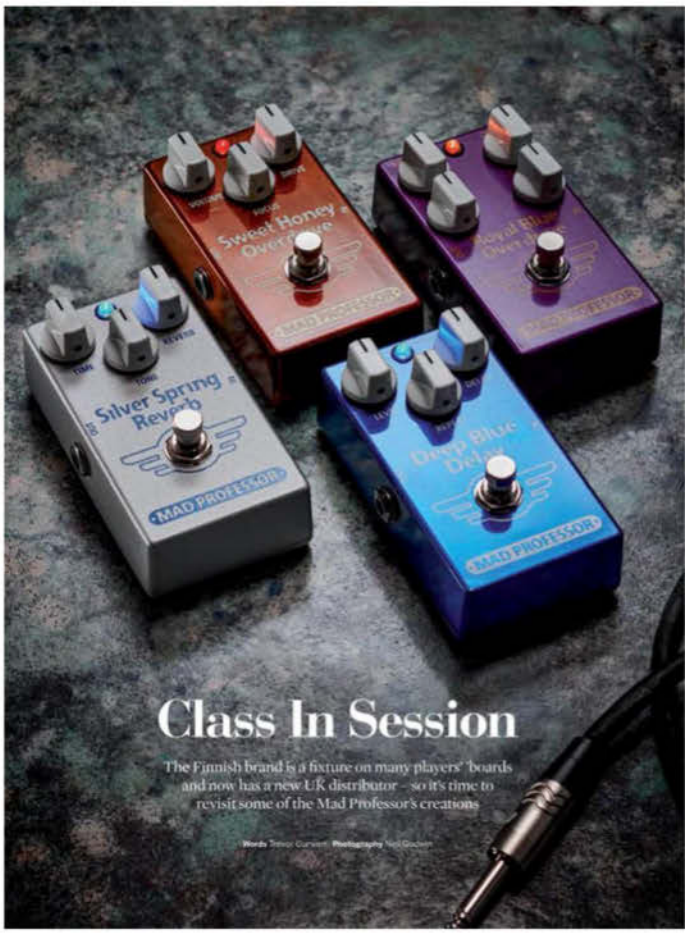
If a DSP fails it won't be user-replaceable. Specialist tools are needed to replace a large circuit processor and in some cases the whole circuit board might need to be replaced. Even worse, replacement parts might not be available, even after a short space of time. I had to recently scrap a Line 6 HD500 because a replacement part wasn't available. A multitude of other components can fail and be difficult to repair; remember, any modelling amp/effect unit is closer to a computer than a guitar amp.

So, suggesting that a modern DSP-powered device won't wear out while a valve amp will is quite misleading. The truth is, if a conventionally built valve amp (no DSPs or surface mount components) is well looked after it can last a lifetime. If a DSP-powered device fails, it might well be heading for a skip.

Keith Marriott

Thanks for your thoughtful perspectives on this interesting topic, Keith. Amp reviewer Nick Guppy, who wrote the piece you're referring to, sent this (edited) response: "The point I was making is that electron valves have always been consumables, expected to wear out and need replacing over time. By simply switching a valve amp on, you're shortening the life of the valves in it. By an imperceptible amount day to day, yes, but over the course of a year you would begin to hear a difference when comparing those worn valves with new ones. Electron-producing oxide coatings on cathodes are dissipated, suspended components like plates and grids are vibrated and grow loose, oxygen molecules find their way past the seals around the pins or through microscopic hairline cracks in the base and soften the vacuum inside the glass envelope.

"That's the thing. Digital signal processors – the modern analogy of valves – aren't consumables and don't wear out simply as a result of being used. Their operating parameters are determined by software, which doesn't degrade over time. You can get a great sound out of your digital modelling amp at a gig, save the settings and know it will be exactly the same in a month or a year on. If you're a pro and your job is to reproduce a guitar part just how it sounds on a record, night after night, that's important. You can't easily do that with a valve amp. As your amp's valves wear out, the tone and response will progressively change, and when you replace them, the likelihood is it will be different again. If you're an amateur, playing mostly at home for your own enjoyment and doing three or four gigs a month as many of us do, none of that's really relevant and, I agree, you can probably expect to enjoy your valve amp for years without replacing anything."



PEDAL POINT

My wife bought the January issue (506) for me to read. I never buy magazines as I think they're too expensive. I feel I need to point out that on page 107 you have your pedals in completely the wrong order and I am a little surprised that as so-called professional guitarists you should make such a beginner-type mistake. Of course, now I've contacted you to point out your silly mistake, I will have to get my wife to buy next month's issue to see if you have the courage to own up to it and print my email...

Keef Dace

Keef, we'll admit that your letter sent us scurrying off to find the article in question – we did worry it was in a feature on signal chains on pedalboards. However, the article you mention was a group test review, and while we salute your attention to detail, those pictures aren't really meant to show the pedals arrayed in typical signal chain order. None

Natural order: do you stick to hard and fast rules on signal chain order? Or are you more open to experimenting with your pedal placement? Our review below prompted an interesting conversation...

"While there are classic combinations of effects and signal chain configurations, there aren't any etched-in-granite rules on pedal order"

MAD PROFESSOR PEDALS | REVIEW

MAD PROFESSOR SWEET HONEY OVERDRIVE, ROYAL BLUE OVERDRIVE, DEEP BLUE DELAY & SILVER SPRING REVERB £199, £179, £199 & £199

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What You Need To Know

1 **We haven't heard much from this company for a while...**
Well, Finland's finest pedal brand has been going strong for over 20 years, but maybe things have been a bit quiet of late. The line has now got a new UK distributor in First Line Distribution, so we thought it would be a good time to do a round-up.

2 **Why these four particular pedals?**
These have been in production for a long time unaltered – and they just keep going, while other pedals have come and gone. Mad Professor considers them its classics.

Mad Professor Amplification's first products were made in 2002 and the company says that they are a culmination of decades of work with guitars, amps and pedals. Since that first pedal arrived, there have been many additions to the catalogue, some of which have had real longevity, while others have been discontinued. One of the last Mad Professor pedals we took a look at (back in issue 443) was the Loud'n Proud, which offered the sound of a vintage Marshall amp with a fuzzbox in front of it. It is now discontinued, but the four we're looking at today have been stalwarts of the range and never out of production. These are very well put-together pedals and all have the same form factor with inputs/outputs on the sides. There's also a nine-volt connection on the right-hand side, but all will run from a PP3 battery accessed by removing four crosshead screws and the bottom plate.

Sweet Honey Overdrive

This is Mad Professor's take on the low- to mid-gain overdrive pedal, typically used to add a little hair to clean amps or to drive already dirty amplifiers a little harder. There's an easy-to-dial-in three-knob control surface here with self-explanatory Volume and Drive knobs, plus a Focus knob that the brand says is for adjusting the feel and dynamics of the pedal, as well as overall EQ.

The pedal is capable of a small but practical clean boost with the Drive at minimum and a decent amp-like crunch at maximum. What is particularly notable is the response to playing dynamics, which really is quite amp-like – you can play softer for the clean-ish sounds, while bolder strokes can really bring out dirt. All of this expressive nature can be tempered with the Focus knob, providing plenty of variation on the driven theme. At its lower settings, there's a smooth, warmer rounded sound and the dynamics are such that you have to dig in that little bit harder to get overdriven sounds, but as you turn it up you'll get an increase in top-end presence and an easier transition into driven sounds. This is the sort of pedal you may wish to keep on all the time, but it also stacks really well as a booster in front of other drive pedals. The company also has a limited-edition version with its 'Fat Bee mod' that essentially tweaks the bottom-end.

of the pedals are connected, so they're really just there to illustrate what's new from that maker.

Now, we could take things further and always shoot groups of pedals in the 'correct' signal chain order, but here's the thing: we're always keen to state – along with many effects experts who have given similar views in the mag – that while there are classic combinations of effects and signal chain configurations that *tend* to work well, there aren't any etched-in-granite rules on pedal order. Some players like high-gain drive pedals to feed into lower-gain ones; others prefer the complete opposite. Some people put delay *before* overdrive, which is pretty radical, but it achieves a certain sonic effect that some players can make use of or just like the sound of.

The point is that while we should be aware of how things work together (some fuzz pedals won't work in a classic-sounding way if there's a buffer before them, for example), we need not feel bound by those 'rules' as if they were immutable laws. They're really just a framework you can build on or do differently if it floats your boat. Hope that helps.

SECOND SIGHT

I have a tip for guitarists who wear eyeglasses. Many lenses for eyeglasses are a compromise for near, medium and distance, especially progressive lenses. After several hours on my desktop computer, I would have terrible eye strain. So I measured the distance from my shoulder to the screen and requested a pair of single-vision glasses with that focal length. Result: no more squinting and eye fatigue. What does this have to do with playing guitar? Turns out I could now read music on a stand clearly. The focal length is the same as for my desktop computer. Two birds, one stone! Hope this helps anyone having difficulty with sight-reading music.
Dave Tartaglia

Thanks, Dave, for your clear-sighted, ahem, wisdom. Our editor drives himself mad propping his glasses on his head and flipping them down again to find the right focal point for different daily tasks, so he may well take your advice himself!

Many spectacle-wearing guitarists may benefit from Dave Tartaglia's advice on avoiding eye strain when reading music. We'll have to ask session pro and sometime contributor Adam Goldsmith (above) for his experience!

PHOTO BY SEBASTIAN REUTER/REDFERNS

Tony Clarkin, Magnum's founding member songwriter and guitarist, passed away in January

TONY CLARKIN

Hearing the sad news of Tony Clarkin's death today [7 January], I was reminded what a great guitarist he was, bringing finesse, passion and power to Magnum's unique sound. He was understated and perhaps under-appreciated as a guitarist and I can't recall ever seeing him featured in any guitar-related articles. It would be great if *Guitarist* can put this right and include a feature on him.

Matt Jones

Sad news indeed and a bitter loss to so many fans of his playing and of Magnum. We'll run a tribute next issue, but your email also chimes with a letter sent to us reader by John Holmes who has written in a couple of times asking for a tribute to the playing of John Moreshead of Shotgun Express and Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation. John rightly chides us for failing to make good on an earlier promise to do so, so we can only apologise.

Once upon a time *Guitarist* ran a small column called Unsung Heroes – anyone want to see it return? Perhaps it would be the ideal place for that. Write and let us know or, if you prefer, send us a few paragraphs about your favourite unsung – or at least under-appreciated – guitar heroes and we'll print the best.

We can't make any promises regarding Stjohn's request for an in-depth 'reader's rig' review every month, but perhaps a review of the new EVH Frankenstein Relic will be tempting enough?

DIFFERENT CUSTOMS

I'm lucky enough to have collected all manner of gear over the last 40 years and am now an EVH fan. A lot of EVH stuff has been rated by *Guitarist*, but not *my* EVH stuff, specifically the Stealth Lunchbox head, 2x12 cab, Striped Series 5150 and Wolfgang Exotic Bocote. I'm currently enduring the endless wait for a new guitar (the new Eddie signature made in Japan – well worth a review as it's exactly the same as the £4k USA version but £1,700) and you know what it's like when you have a guitar on order, especially one that isn't available yet. Nightly trawls of YouTube to see if anyone has received theirs yet, constant Googling, etc. Maybe it's just me, but I love the validation that comes from watching/reading favourable reviews online.

Which brings me to my idea: The *Guitarist* Review Custom Shop! One lucky reader a month could submit a piece of gear for the full treatment – detailed review, photos, etc. Think of the rarities that might show up, and the stories! You could even do an 'As reviewed in *Guitarist*' certificate. I realise that this is unrealistic, but wouldn't it be nice? Sat there looking at *your* guitar/pedal/amp/homemade pedalboard glowing out from the pages of *Guitarist*? If you decide not to run with my genius idea, can you at least have a look at my rig?

Stjohn Mason

That's a nice idea, Stjohn, although I think poor reviews editor, Dave Burrluck, might have a coronary at the thought of fitting it in alongside the other goodies we review! But we like the idea of 'rate my rig' and we used to run something similar in the letters pages. So, readers, send us pics of your go-to guitar and effects/amp rig and we'll print the best here and maybe do a little analysis of why they go together so well.

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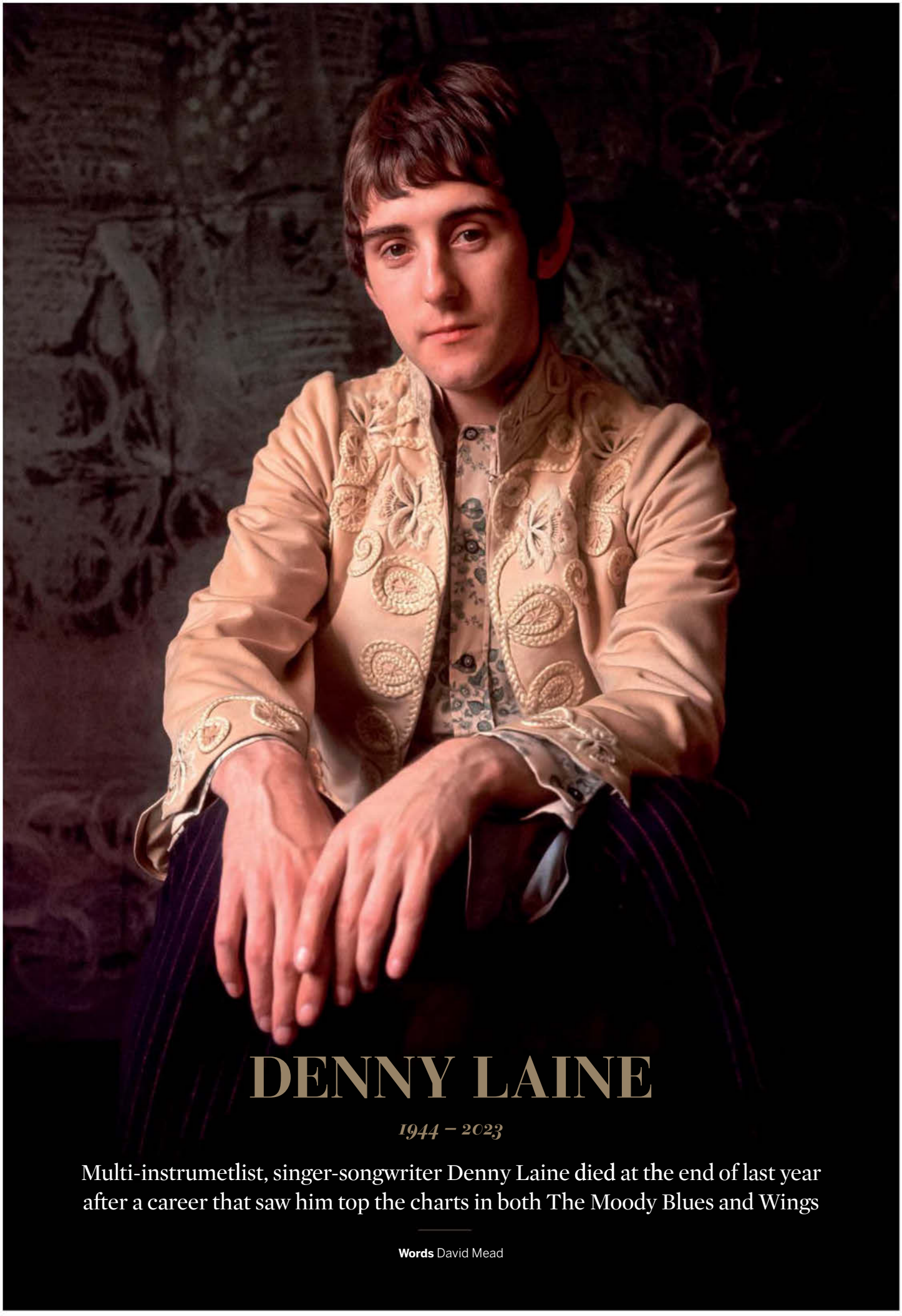


DENNY LAINE

1944 – 2023

Multi-instrumetlist, singer-songwriter Denny Laine died at the end of last year after a career that saw him top the charts in both The Moody Blues and Wings

Words David Mead

PHOTO BY CAROLINE GILLIES/BIPS/GETTY IMAGES

DENNY LAINE

29 October 1944 – 5 December 2023

Brian Frederick Hines was born in Tyseley, Birmingham, later adopting the stage name Denny Laine, the surname chosen to reflect his sister's love of pop crooner Frankie Laine. He took up the guitar early on, inspired by Gypsy jazzer Django Reinhardt, and made considerable headway on the instrument, culminating in him giving his first public performance at the tender age of 12. Later, and with a professional music career set firmly in his sights, Denny formed his own band, the Diplomats, which soon found a following in the Midlands and featured future ELO drummer Bev Bevan.

Denny soon realised that moving to London was the next big step he had to take if his musical career stood any kind of a chance, but his fellow Diplomats didn't want to turn professional and so Denny left the band in 1964 and went on to form the M&B 5 Blues Band, named after beer company Mitchells & Butlers, with Ray Thomas and Mike Pinder. Blues bands were beginning to become big business at the time, especially on the London music scene, but after a while the M&B 5 morphed into The Moody Blues.

Denny (second from right) with Wings at Abbey Road Studios in November 1974 during the *Venus And Mars* album sessions

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

"Denny was an outstanding vocalist and guitar player. He will be missed by all his fans and remembered with great fondness by his friends" **PAUL MCCARTNEY**

Success came relatively quickly to the new band when they were discovered by the industry after a tour in support of Chuck Berry. After signing a record deal, they scored a chart hit with a cover of American blues and soul singer Bessie Banks' song *Go Now*, which featured Denny on lead vocals and would go on to be remembered as one of his finest moments, as Steven Van Zandt stated in his tribute on X: "Fantastic first and best lead singer of The Moody Blues. Their very rootsy R&B-based classic first album remains their best thanks to Denny. *Go Now* forever one of the great vocals of all time."

Denny soon started flexing his songwriting muscles by penning two minor hits for the band with fellow Moody Mike Pinder – *From The Bottom Of My Heart (I Love You)* and *Everyday* – which were both released on Decca Records in 1965. The Moodies aimed to achieve the same kind of success as that of The Beatles and supported The Fabs on their second UK tour. It was then that Denny befriended Paul McCartney, who said in tribute: "[Denny] was an outstanding vocalist and guitar player... [He] was a great talent with a fine sense of humour and was always ready to help other people. He will be missed by all his fans and remembered with great fondness by his friends." Their friendship was to pay dividends later in Denny's career.

Denny left The Moody Blues in 1966, just before the band changed direction and became one of the first in the new progressive rock movement of the time. Inspired by the string arrangement on The Beatles' hit *Eleanor Rigby*, Denny formed The Electric String Band, which featured Denny on guitar and vocals, Viv Prince on drums and Binky McKenzie on bass, plus a string section. Despite sharing the bill with Procul Harem and The Jimi Hendrix Experience at London's Saville Theatre in 1967, the band soon fizzled out.

After a few more attempts at breaking through into the major league of 60s pop, including stints with the band Balls in 1969 and Ginger Baker's Air Force in 1970, the show at the Saville Theatre was about to change Denny's life. It turned out that Paul McCartney had been in the audience that night and when The Beatles finally called it a day at the end of the 60s, the call went into Denny asking him to join Wings. Denny is on record as saying that he shared many of the same influences as Macca – Buddy Holly, Elvis, Little Richard – and things fell rapidly into place.

Denny joined McCartney at his hideaway in Scotland and began a feverish period of rehearsing and songwriting. The hits soon followed – *My Love*, *Live And Let Die*, *Jet* – not forgetting albums such as *Band On The Run*, *Venus And Mars* and *London Town*. Wings' most renowned single came in 1977 with *Mull Of Kintyre*. Denny recalled: "I went over to [Paul's] house at breakfast and he played me this chorus and I said, 'Well, that's a possible hit...'" The single went on to stay at the top of the charts for a record-breaking nine weeks.

Wings broke up in the early 80s and Denny enjoyed some solo success, working once again with McCartney on the albums *Tug Of War* and *Pipes Of Peace*, and co-writing the song *Rainclouds*, which was issued as the B-side to *Ebony And Ivory* in 1982.

In 2022 Denny caught Covid and complications set in, resulting in surgery to his lungs. He passed away in Naples, Florida, from interstitial lung disease on the 5 December 2023. "He was an icon and a sweet man," said Christopher Cross. "Denny was a joy to work with."

TELL ME STRAIGHT

Keith Richards, the legendary master of the ageless riff, talks about the magic and loss of *Hackney Diamonds*, the sparkling new Rolling Stones album

Words Brad Tolinski **Photo** Chris McKay/Getty Images
This article first appeared in the December 2023 edition of *Guitar Player*

Keith Richards once humorously quipped, "Guitar is easy – all it takes is five fingers, six strings and one asshole." Yes, easy perhaps, but few have wielded the instrument with as much imagination, grit and panache as the legendary Rolling Stone himself. Over the past six decades, the guitarist has unleashed a torrent of timeless riffs, gracing hits like *Jumpin' Jack Flash*, *Satisfaction*, *Honky Tonk Women*, *Start Me Up*, *Can't You Hear Me Knocking* and *Happy*.

And now, brace yourselves for a dozen more hot rocks. At the venerable age of 79 at the album's release in October, and now 80, Richards, accompanied by his eternally youthful crew, The Rolling Stones, has put the final touches on their 24th UK (and 26th US) studio album. Lord knows, it's been a long time comin'. Nearly eight years have passed since the release of their 2016 blues covers album, *Blue & Lonesome*, and twice that time since their last batch of original songs, 2005's *A Bigger Bang*.

The good news is the wait's been worth it. Packed with killer tunes and those trademark Keef guitar hooks, *Hackney Diamonds* stands tall among their very best work. Bold, textured and unapologetically ambitious it recalls classics like *Let It Bleed* (1969) and *Exile On Main St* (1972). The album also features guest appearances by some of rock's greatest luminaries, including Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder, Elton John, Lady Gaga – and even original Stones bassist Bill Wyman, who hasn't recorded with the band for almost 30 years.

Guest cameos often distract more than they add, but The Stones have artfully deployed these music icons in surprisingly subtle and complementary ways. Wonder and Lady Gaga, for example, add just the right touch of soulful elegance to the celestial gospel rave-up *Sweet Sounds Of Heaven*, while Elton discreetly provides some tastefully rollicking piano on two tracks. Perhaps the biggest surprise is McCartney's contribution. Beatle Paul, known primarily for his timeless love songs and gift for melody, goes against type and unleashes the mother of all snarling fuzz-bass lines on *Bite My Head Off*, an exhilarating punk rocker that tears the roof off the joint.

"To be honest, if Paul had come another day, he'd probably have been on a different song," Richards says with a laugh. "It wasn't calculated. It just happened to be the flavour of the month that day."

The guitarist maintains that the album's creation was "fun, quick and effortless", yet he admits it wasn't without a few tears. *Hackney Diamonds* marks the band's first production since the passing of Charlie Watts, one of rock's preeminent drummers, if not the unrivalled champion, who died on 24 August 2021 at the age of 80. The loss of the band's inimitable "engine room" was a bitter pill to swallow.

"Charlie was such a part of me and what I played, I haven't quite come to terms with it yet," Richards says sombrely.

Fortunately, the band was able to find a suitable replacement for Watts with percussionist Steve Jordan, who has played with Richards in the guitarist's various

"It's almost never complicated [with Ronnie]. We just fit together. Usually, Ronnie and I just fall into a groove"

side projects over the past couple decades. And as Keith explains in the following conversation, it was Watts himself who crowned Jordan as his heir apparent.

Despite the loss of their longtime drummer, The Rolling Stones – Richards, singer Mick Jagger and guitarist Ronnie Wood – are in top form on the album, with some credit going to their young 33-year-old producer, ironically named Andrew Watt. While it may surprise some that The Stones would put their legacy in the hands of someone a fraction of their age, Watt has built a solid reputation by crafting excellent albums for several top-shelf veteran rockers and rappers, like Ozzy Osbourne, Eddie Vedder, Iggy Pop, Post Malone and Juice Wrld, all of which earned him the prestigious 2021 Grammy Award for Producer Of The Year.

But earning a Grammy is one thing, and gaining the respect of Richards, who undoubtedly has seen it all (and then some) is a whole 'nother matter. The guitarist, however, makes it abundantly clear that he enjoyed working with the producer and credits him with getting the album done in a month or two, something that he considers almost miraculous.

I was overwhelmed by how diverse and fresh the whole album sounds. I understand it had a lengthy evolution.
"Yeah, it took a while to get it going, but when we finished touring last year, Mick and I decided, 'Let's just blitz a record, man,' because we were being too relaxed about it and not really putting it together. We sort of made a project of it and said, 'Let's get a guy that can push this thing with us.' Mick found Andy Watt and, I've got to say, it was quite an experience working with him. He's very young, very enthusiastic, and we worked very fast on it once it got going.

"Initially, I was almost a little sceptical that we would ever finish another album, because it's been so long since we put new stuff out. For a minute, I was sorta waiting to see what would happen."

Sometimes it's good to have a deadline.
"Exactly. That was Mick's opinion. I said, 'If you've got enough material, let's go for it.' That's how it happened."

It's been 15 years since your last batch of original songs with The Stones. As an artist, did you feel like you had something to prove?
"I'm not sure whether we needed to prove anything. I mean, maybe we needed to prove we could still make a record. But Mick had been building up material, and once I heard it, I said, 'Well, we need to do a little bit of movement here or work on the bridge and stuff.' But a lot of the time, his ideas were together, so once we got in the studio, it wasn't that difficult. It was also incredible to work with Steve Jordan for the first time on a Stones record. It was like presenting a 'Stones now' kind of thing [laughs]."

The first two songs, *Angry* and *Get Close*, begin with great kick-ass rhythm guitar hooks. Does your songwriting process usually begin with finding a great guitar riff?
"Kind of, although from my point of view, there's no fixed formula for writing a song. I feel more like I'm an antenna than a creator, particularly because, to me,

1. Ronnie Wood (left) and Keith Richards perform in Charlotte, North Carolina, September 2021, with drummer Steve Jordan, who joined the fold in August 2021, having played alongside Richards in the X-Pensive Winos from the mid-80s

PHOTO BY JEFF HAHNE/GETTY IMAGES

songs seem to come from somewhere out there in the cosmos. If I sit down with a guitar or a piano and just start playing, eventually a song comes. It's a bad day when it doesn't [laughs]. Most of the time I feel like I'm just receiving inspiration from everything that has gone on before me, and then put it through my own point of view, and then sort of pass it on. I almost don't feel any sense of ownership."

Most guitar players are pretty good at noodling around. The hope is always that you stumble onto something interesting.
"Yeah, exactly. Right. I mean, sometimes an idea just finds you. Regardless, guitar playing is just a fantastic form of relaxation. Everybody should have one!"

I know this is very personal, but how did Charlie Watts' death affect you?
"All I can say is that I loved the man dearly and I miss him. I still have conversations with the fucker [laughs]."

You worked with drummer Steve Jordan for quite a few years on your side projects with the X-Pensive Winos [which also featured Waddy Wachtel, Bobby Keys, Ivan Neville and Charley Drayton]. That must've made the transition a bit easier.
"When I started putting the Winos together, it was Charlie Watts who told me, 'If you're going to work with anybody else, Steve Jordan is your man.' So Steve's been wearing that mantle for a while, and we all knew him, so in that way the transfer wasn't that difficult. But, still, it's impossible to put into words what Charlie meant to us. He was just a fantastic friend and so much more."

I know that Charlie was a huge fan of drummers. He was a real scholar. For Steve to get his endorsement is significant.
"Absolutely. And you're right about Charlie, he was totally invested in the great drummers of the 30s and 40s, like Max Roach and Art Blakey. Swing drummers were his joy. He was a historian on them. Yeah. He knew just about everything about 'em. The history side of it was very important for Charlie."

What did he appreciate about Steve's playing?
"I think he recognised him as a soulmate. Steve had been listening to Charlie since he was a kid and knew his playing from the ground up. He can do an incredible imitation of Charlie's drumming, and I think Charlie got a kick out of that."

It's not easy to catch the nuances of Charlie's feel.
"No, it isn't. No. He had his own little ways of playing and some of those secrets he's taken with him."

Charlie appears on two tracks on *Hackney Diamonds*: *Mess It Up* and *Live By The Sword*. The album credits list that his performances were produced by Don Was, who produced your previous two albums, so we imagine the genesis of those songs came from earlier sessions.
"We had just started working on those tracks a few years ago, before Covid shut everything down. We left Charlie's tracks as they were and redid the vocals and everything else with Andy Watt. As soon as you hear that snare, you know it's him."

2. Charlie Watts was a member of The Rolling Stones from 1963 until his death in 2021. "It's impossible to put into words what Charlie meant to us," says Keith. "He was just a fantastic friend and so much more"

Did Charlie have much input in the way that your songs were constructed?
"No, I wouldn't say that. He would listen to whatever we brought in and made his own decisions about how to play it, but Charlie thought that a song was to be played, and I believe he didn't think that songwriting was a part of his job. He just liked songs, and if he liked them, he'd play 'em."

You must have had an incredible connection with him, because I know a lot of guitar players play to the drummer.
"Yeah, especially rock 'n' roll players, if the drummer is the right kind of drummer. Charlie could swing and he could roll it a little more than most straight rock drummers. Charlie always added a jazz tinge to everything he played, so there was always that slightly different feel about The Stones' music."

There are a lot of 'full-circle moments' on the record, moments that take you back to the band's origins. One is having Bill Wyman play in the studio with the band after a 30-year absence. How did that come about?
"Well, Bill and I have regularly stayed in touch through the years. He quite often sends me bits of information over the phone. I always see him when I go to England. In fact, I'm going to London next week, and I have no doubt that I'll see him then. I'm not sure if he sees a lot of Mick and Ronnie, but I always make a sure point of getting to him. We just thought it would be cool to have him on one of the last tracks with Charlie. A reunion of sorts.

"Charlie always added a jazz tinge to everything he played, so there was a slightly different feel about The Stones' music"

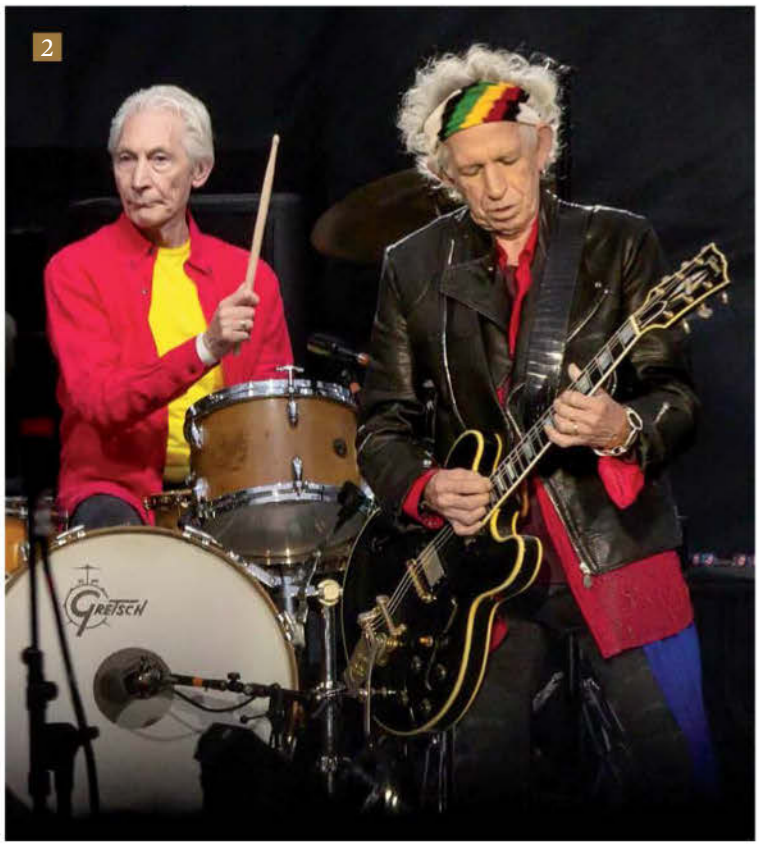


PHOTO BY FRANK HOENSCH/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

"THERE'S NO FIXED FORMULA FOR WRITING A SONG. I FEEL MORE LIKE I'M AN ANTENNA THAN A CREATOR... I ALMOST DON'T FEEL ANY SENSE OF OWNERSHIP"

"I don't know how I started moving in that direction," Keith says of adopting the Fender Telecaster, the guitar with which he is most closely identified. "I think it was something to do with the way I was playing, and a Telecaster made it easier"

PHOTO BY CHRIS MCKAY/GETTY IMAGES

"Unfortunately, we weren't in the same room together to record that – because we all just overdubbed to Charlie's original track. But we're all still good friends. The Stones are still The Stones in their own way. I mean, no band has lasted this long, so there is really nothing to compare it with. We see each other when we can. It's not like we forgot each other just because somebody leaves the band."

How did Paul McCartney enter the picture? I think it shocked everyone when it was announced that he was going to be on a Rolling Stones track.
"He had been doing some work with Andrew Watt as well and happened to be around and dropped by. I don't even think he intended to play bass on a track, but once he was there, I just said, 'Come on, you're in. You ain't leaving until you play.' [laughs]"

Famously, John [Lennon] and Paul wrote *I Wanna Be Your Man* for The Stones, and it became your first hit in England.
"The Beatles and The Stones have been basically joined together at the hips from the beginning. We were totally different bands, but we knew each other well. I think we first met them in the fall of '62, when they came down to see us play in London, and from there, every now and again, we'd get in touch. Later, John and Paul sang on *We Love You* and on *Dandelion*. We've always sort of been in touch. Ronnie and I used to hang with George Harrison quite a bit in the 1970s, so there's always been an open door between The Beatles and The Stones. We were the only ones that knew what it's like to have that extreme kind of fame in the 1960s, so that created a bond."

Another 'full circle moment' comes at the end of the record, when you and Mick perform a terrific, intimate duet of Muddy Waters' *Rolling Stones Blues*, the song that gave your band its name.
"That was Andrew's idea. He turned up at the studio with a 1920s Gibson L-4 acoustic and asked us to do that Muddy thing. Ironically, I'd never played that song before, but the guitar was beautiful and we did it in a couple of takes. The guitar that he laid on me was just the perfect sort of instrument for the job. It was perfectly archaic and, I must confess, pretty difficult to play [laughs]."

What does the music of Muddy Waters mean to you?
"It's the foundation. The blues was what I was chasing as a young man, and at one point I was going to stay there, and it was only rock 'n' roll that got me out [laughs]. But, to me, if you're a rock musician, it's essential to have a grounding in the blues, and it doesn't get much better than Muddy Waters."

When I heard that song at the end of the album, I thought it would be a perfect way to end your recording legacy. You know, "Here's where it started, and this is the way it's ending." Were you concerned that people might interpret it that way?
"Man, I've never even come close to thinking of wrapping up The Rolling Stones' story, so my answer to that is 'Absolutely not.' It was just a cool way of wrapping up this album, and the story so far. We plan to keep working. I know we're going to work [in 2024].

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

3. The Beatles and Rolling Stones' history is inextricably linked. Paul and Linda McCartney (right) are pictured here backstage with Mick Jagger (left) and Bill Wyman (centre) at a Rolling Stones concert at New York's Palladium, June 1978

"Making music is still quite exciting for me. I hadn't realised how long it was since our last album, I think eight years ago or something. It's funny how time flies, man, but I'm enjoying the process of releasing a new record and seeing what happens."

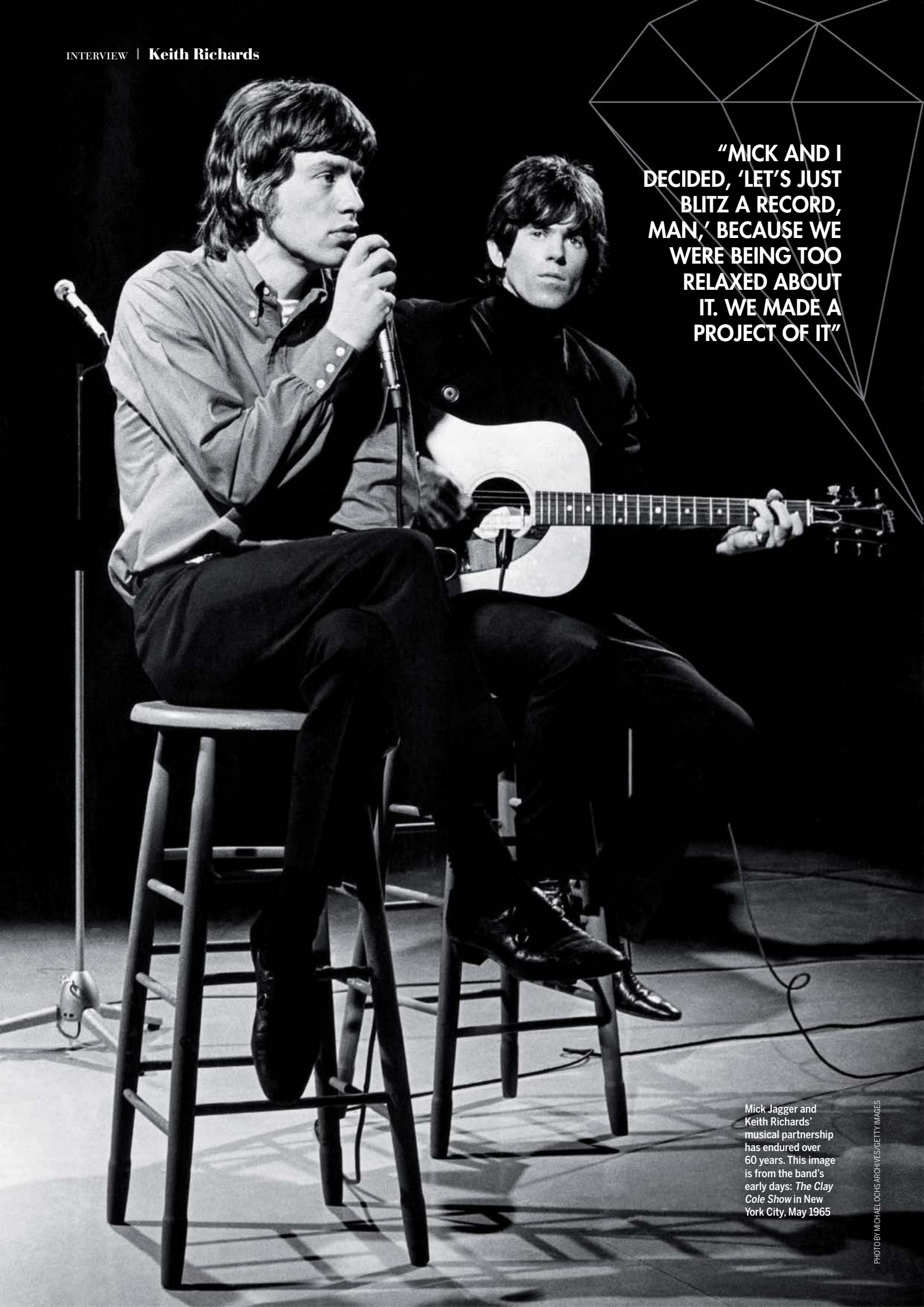
Since the 1970s, The Stones have been a fluid entity. You had all these adjunct members, like pianist Nicky Hopkins, guitarist Mick Taylor or saxophonist Bobby Keys, that came and went. Do you feel like that was an essential element in keeping the band interesting and evolving?
"There's some truth to that, but it wasn't intentional. It was just, 'Hey, we need a piano, we need a sax.' And the best guys just kept hanging around [laughs]. But you're absolutely right: all of that extra talent and new blood has always helped The Rolling Stones. Ian Stewart was our first piano player, and in many ways The Rolling Stones were his band. But I mean, God, man, it's been 60 years. You're going to go through a few changes, right? [laughs]"

"There's always been an open door between The Beatles and The Stones. That extreme fame in the 1960s created a bond"

It's super smart to bounce ideas off new musicians, but most bands seem to believe that it 'dilutes the brand'.
"Yeah, I don't understand that way of thinking. We had Stevie Wonder and Lady Gaga bounce in, too, which was a surprise, and it came out cool."

I was a little nervous when I heard Lady Gaga was going to be on a track. I didn't know where that was going to go, but I have to say, *Sweet Sounds Of Heaven* is one of my favourite songs on the record.
"Right, I don't blame you. I understand what you were thinking, but she's one of The Stones now."

Her gospel singing on the song is pretty righteous.
"She's a talented piece of work. It also helped to have Stevie Wonder playing keyboards. Having the both of them in the same room was pretty interesting."



"MICK AND I DECIDED, 'LET'S JUST BLITZ A RECORD, MAN,' BECAUSE WE WERE BEING TOO RELAXED ABOUT IT. WE MADE A PROJECT OF IT"

Mick Jagger and Keith Richards' musical partnership has endured over 60 years. This image is from the band's early days: *The Clay Cole Show* in New York City, May 1965

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

***Sweet Sounds Of Heaven* is built around a textbook gospel chord progression. Did that come from you?**
"The sound and feel of gospel runs through almost everything we've ever done, but Mick and I never actually pinned it down in such a specific way. *Sweet Sounds Of Heaven* started as more of an Otis Redding-style soul music thing and evolved from there. Soul music and gospel are just a part of us, and at the right time it suddenly comes out.

"There was no sort of premeditated decision to do a gospel thing. Mick just had these lyrics, and then there it was. We worked it out while we were all in a room together, so it felt very organic. I don't think that song could've come together any other way. I was wondering about the false ending at the time. I didn't get it. But then I got into the flow of it and I think it really works."

I'm a huge Stevie Wonder fan, and we haven't heard much from him in recent years. He sounds great on the track and seems like he has so much to offer.
"We used to work with Stevie on the road quite a lot in the 1970s, so we've known each other for quite a while. But Stevie does what he wants to do, and when he wants to do it, he does it."

As you've noted, the album is produced by Andrew Watt. He's much younger than you guys. I think he was only 15 years old when you came out with your last batch of originals. What did he bring to the table?
"He brought exactly what we wanted: energy and a fresh mind. He knew our stuff back to front, and I think he had a ball making The Stones' record. It was fun to make, very quick, compared with a lot of our records. We did most of it in a month or two. I enjoyed working with him."

Well, you've got kids, so I imagine that you can respect the value of a younger perspective, too.
"Right. It rubs off."

If your ears are open, sometimes you can learn some new things.
"Right. And it's all about listening. It's music. There's something there."

One of the more striking elements on the record are Mick's vocals. His approach is more direct and less stylised than in recent years. It's almost a return to way he sang in the 1960s with producer Andrew Loog Oldham.
"Oh, that's interesting. Maybe it's because both producers are named Andrew [laughs]! But you make a point. Mick worked hard, and I think he put more consideration into each song rather than just doing it. It was my observation that he thought a lot more about the vocals than usual."

They felt more honest.
"Yeah, I get your picture. I had pretty much the same impression as you on that, but I really put it down to the fact that Andrew and Mick worked very tightly on each track."

On *Tell Me Straight*, your lead vocal also has a new vitality. You're really belting it out.
"People have been telling me I sound stronger after I stopped smoking cigarettes in 2019. When we went out on the road a couple years ago, the sound guys started making comments. They were like, 'Man, your voice... what's happening?' Since then, singing has felt different and I'm enjoying it more."

PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR RS

4. *Hackney Diamonds* features an A-list roster of guests, including Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder, Elton John and Lady Gaga – who is pictured here performing during The Stones' surprise set at Racket NYC in October 2023 to promote the new album

You sound like a kid on that song!
"There's probably an age when you start to go into reverse. And I'm probably in it [laughs]."

***Tell Me Straight* feels like a life philosophy, sort of a song you were born to write: part mythic, part hardcore truth.**
"Oh, cool. It came kind of like that. Once it was on the roller, these chords appeared and then the rest of it seemed to fall into place around it. I knew it was getting pretty good because Mick tried to steal it! I had to say, 'Uh-uh, buddy. I'm doin' this one.' [laughs]"

"[Blues is] the foundation. It was what I was chasing as a young man, and it was only rock 'n' roll that got me out"

There are a lot of guitars on the album. Lots of texture.
"My five-string Tele is on a good half of the tracks, but there's also a lot of the Gibson. That's not unusual. I've never just used one guitar in the studio, but I've been getting to know this '59 Gibson ES-355 lately, and I really enjoy playing it."

In the early days of The Stones, you leaned pretty hard into Gibson Les Pauls, and then there was a bit of a shift. Do you remember what first drew you into using a Fender Telecaster?
"I don't know how I started moving in that direction. I think it was something to do with the way I was playing, and a Telecaster made it easier. But I've always loved Gibson guitars, and, I mean, there's a lot of overdubs on everything here, so, as usual with every Rolling Stones record, there's a great mixture of different guitars."

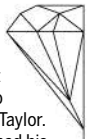
Fender and Gibson guitars make a great time-honoured pairing, right?
"And then, of course, it depends what amp you're going to use. Yeah, it's a big difference. I used Fender Twins most of the time, with the occasional Fender Champ when I was looking for something different."

5. Mick Taylor left the band in 1974 – and almost 40 years later he joined The Stones on stage as a guest for the '50 & Counting' tour to celebrate five decades of the band

I'd like to ask you a few questions about the appeal of playing your five-string Tele tuned to open G [GDGBD]. Is it because it automatically creates a great blend with a standard six-string?

"Yeah, that's part of it. That's the sound of a Stones record: a five-string with a six-string on top, and Ronnie. It always creates a beautiful blend. A great example is how it sounds with Ronnie's Dobro on [the *Hackney Diamonds* track] *Dreamy Skies*. You always have to play around with the amps a bit, but guitars are amazing things. You can make an orchestra out of them with just a simple blend."

"The Stones are still The Stones in their own way. No band has lasted this long… there is really nothing to compare it with"



6. Jeff Beck's talent was indisputable, but he wasn't considered to replace Mick Taylor. "We felt Jeff had his own furrow to plough," says Keith. "He was a soloist to the max"

Your band arrangements tend to be a little dense. In addition to a few guitars, there are often some keyboards, horns and backing vocals. Do you find that by eliminating your low sixth string, it opens the mix up so other instruments can be properly heard?

"Yes! It's always been the mystery to me why so much space opens up for other instruments by taking off the bottom string. You're right, but I can't really put my finger on a reason why, but somehow that one extra note disappearing allows for all kinds of other instruments to come through. It's just one of those things, I guess."

PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/WIREIMAGE

PHOTO BY BRIAN RASIC/GETTY IMAGES

What was it like working with Ronnie on this record? Do you guys spend a lot of time figuring out those guitar blends?

"Truth is, it's almost never complicated. We just fit together. I mean, it's like knit one, purl two, and it's not something we need to think or talk about too much. If we thought about it, it would probably become too studied. It either works or it doesn't. And if it doesn't, then we try it another way. But usually, Ronnie and I just fall into a groove without even discussing it."

Would you mind just talking about a couple of older songs? When people ask me about the importance of rhythm guitar, I always direct them to *Can't You Hear Me Knocking* from your *Sticky Fingers* album. Everyone focuses on the extended solos by Bobby Keys and Mick Taylor, but what kills me are all the different rhythm parts that you use to frame those solos.

"If I can remember rightly, I was really focused on working on the tuning thing and different ways of playing the guitar. I think it was at the time when I was really just balancing between playing with open tunings and regular tunings, so all kinds of different things were sort of coming out. That was with [producer] Jimmy Miller, who loved to play around with stuff like that. The track really grew while we were playing it. It was a good day."

Okay, here's another one: *Love In Vain* [from 1969's *Let It Bleed*], your reinvention of the classic Robert Johnson blues song. No-one can play like Robert – and you were probably smart to not even try – but your arrangement is equally terrific.

"I've always loved that tune, and I always thought there was something about the melody that suggested it wasn't just a blues song. I heard a bit of country or folk in it, so I attacked it from that perspective. I remember thinking I wasn't going to try to play it like Robert, and I wasn't even going to play it like a blues. I'm going to pick out the notes and take it in a different direction. It just so happened that both Mick Jagger and Mick Taylor cottoned on to the idea, and we found ourselves doing it a new way."

One last thing. Another great musician passed [last] year. What did you think of Jeff Beck? And is there any truth that he was being considered for The Stones after Mick Taylor left?

"Jeff? No, we felt that Jeff had his own furrow to plough and that he was not a team man. He was a soloist to the max. He was such an individualist. It wouldn't have worked with The Stones at all. We're all about teamwork. But don't get me wrong, he was a tremendous player. The odd times we got together, I was always amazed by the stuff that he did with his tremolo bar. He was one of the best, man, and he's going to be missed."

So, do you think your next album will be done…

"…sometime before the next century? Yeah, I do hope so [laughs]. And I suppose given the normal pattern of things, we'll probably be on the road [in 2024]. And after that, we'll see."

Hackney Diamonds is available now on Polydor Records. See the website for more details and for 2024 tour dates ***https://rollingstones.com***

"I'VE NEVER EVEN COME CLOSE TO THINKING OF WRAPPING UP THE ROLLING STONES' STORY... WE PLAN TO KEEP WORKING"

Keith's famous use of just five strings has clear benefits for the band, too. "It's always been the mystery to me why so much space opens up for other instruments by taking off the bottom string," he says. "Somehow that one extra note disappearing allows for all kinds of other instruments to come through"

PHOTO BY JAVIER BRAGADO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

WHAT THE WORLD IS WAITING FOR

Off the radar since The Stone Roses reunion burnt out – and largely absent from the studio for two decades – John Squire's collaboration with Liam Gallagher reclaims his place among the greats. He invites us to his studio to talk classic riffs, career-ending injuries, getting snubbed by Gibson, and why music keeps pulling him back in

Words Henry Yates **Photography** Adam Gasson

This must be the place. Deep in the sheep-sprinkled Cheshire moorlands, behind an unassuming farmhouse door, a creative whirlwind awaits us. Model aeroplanes swoop from the rafters. Craft knives, toy robots, aerosols and half-finished energy drinks jostle for desk space, while an art supplies cupboard spills with tins, palettes and brushes. Perhaps most revealing of all, in this rock 'n' roll edition of *Through The Keyhole*, is the paint-spattered canvas in one corner: a dead giveaway for anyone who came of age amid the bucket hats and loose-limbed beats of summer '89.

This can only be the home studio of John Squire: sometime guitarist for Manchester's seminal Stone Roses, latterly acclaimed visual artist, now offering a handshake and apologising for a border terrier he warns is liable to hump our leg.

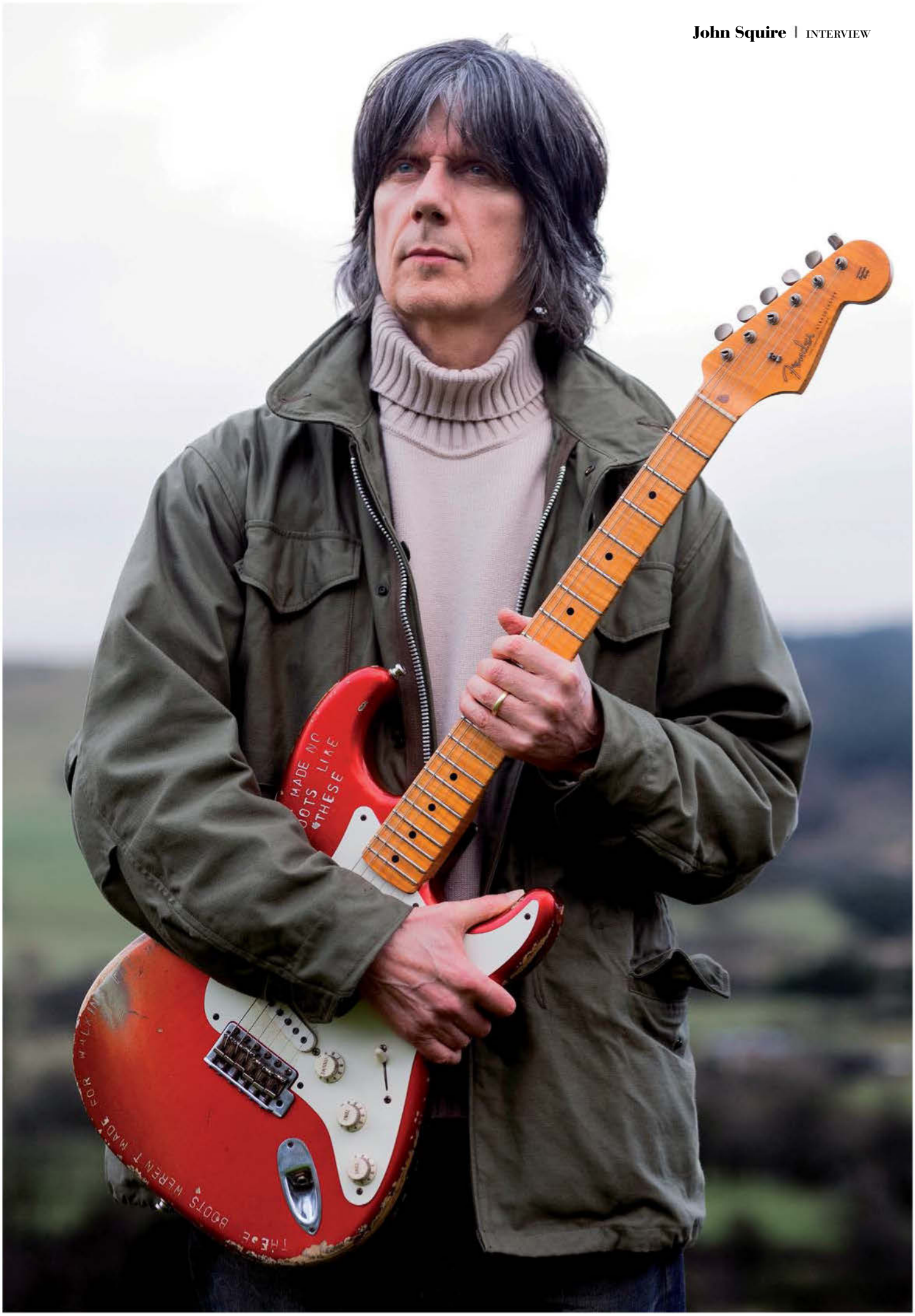
But will he talk? Squire is the last enigma left in British rock. Back in the Roses' heyday – when he was both patently unsuited to the role of guitar hero and the perfect man for the job – he hid behind his fringe, foxed interviewers with murmured wisdom, and let his life-affirming waterfalls of Byrdsian jangle, Hendrix funk, seismic blues and Northern soul do the talking.

Three decades later, Squire has only dialled up the mystique. The guitarist is seldom seen in public beyond his art exhibitions and a rare guest spot at last year's Knebworth show by Liam Gallagher (a reprise of Squire's cameo with Oasis at the same site in 1996). Since the second and presumably final split of the Roses in 2017, he has seemingly granted just one print interview. When Squire doesn't have a band – which has been the case for significant stretches of his 61 years – he pulls down the shutters and leaves little more than a shadow.

Given that, nobody saw the twist coming. Last December, an album sampler codenamed TWIX dropped into select inboxes, confirming the whispers that Squire and Gallagher had been collaborating on the sly. Punky, bluesy and psychedelic, the resulting eponymous album is arguably the best thing either musician has put his name to in decades – and once we've tuned in to the guitarist's signature brand of laconic charisma, his pride in the new work is obvious.

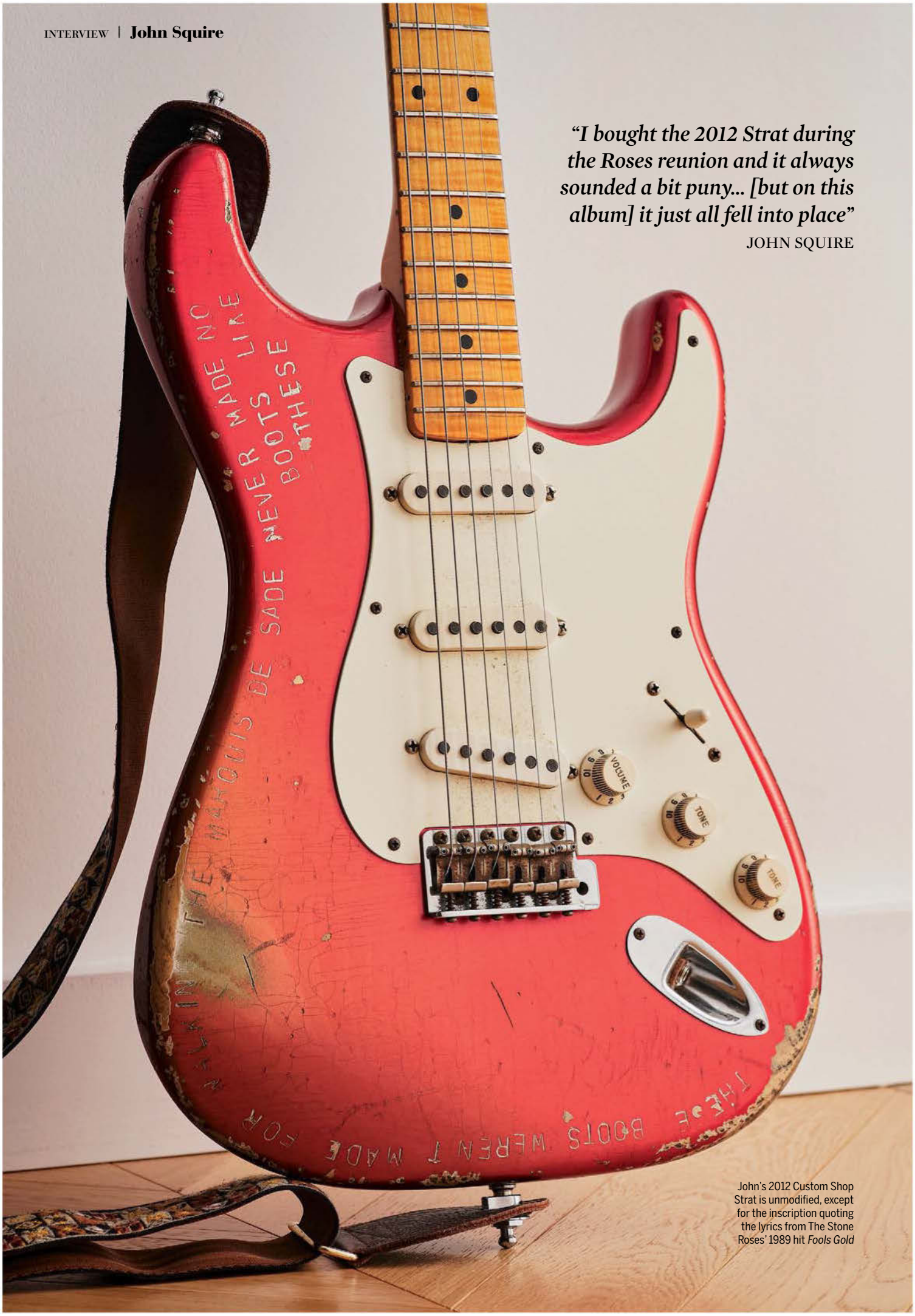
Who suggested the collaboration with Liam?

"I had a catch-up with my managers, and it was just a casual comment, but I mentioned I was writing again and I wondered if they could keep an eye out for a good female vocalist. I started getting audio clips, but nothing seemed quite right and it fizzled out. Then I was asked: 'Liam's doing a Knebworth anniversary show – you played at the first one, do you want to play at the second one?' It was at the rehearsal that I first talked about this album with Liam. After the second show, I started talking about how we were going to collaborate, and he said, 'No, you're writing it, and as long as there's loads of guitars, I'm in.' That was everything I needed to hear."


MADE NO
OTS LIKE
THESE
THESE BOOTS WEREN'T MADE FOR

"I bought the 2012 Strat during the Roses reunion and it always sounded a bit puny... [but on this album] it just all fell into place"

JOHN SQUIRE



John's 2012 Custom Shop Strat is unmodified, except for the inscription quoting the lyrics from The Stone Roses' 1989 hit *Fools Gold*

How would you compare your two Knebworth cameos on *Champagne Supernova*?
"I was more of a show-off at the first one. The brief was just 'go crazy'. I think I did a better job the second time. Apparently, I wasn't well at the first Knebworth show. I don't remember that, but I looked at some old clips and Liam introduced me saying, 'We haven't seen him all day, he's been in bed picking his nose.' This time, he introduced me as 'the coolest man on the planet'. I was praying I wouldn't trip over a monitor or something."

Why do you and Liam click?
"We're on the same page musically. We like the same kind of shoes. He's a loss to stand-up comedy, really entertaining to be around. What do I like about his voice? It's really distinctive. It cuts. It's like asking, 'What do you like about the sound of a Strat?' There's something about it that gets to me."

The media will inevitably call this a supergroup. How do you feel about that term?
"Hmm. I wouldn't be interested in listening to a supergroup. Maybe this will be an exception."

Back at the start, what did you find appealing about the guitar, aesthetically?
"Part of me thinks it's conditioning, from sitting on the carpet watching *Top Of The Pops* in the 70s, all the punk-rock guitarists – the way Joe Strummer decorated his Telecaster, Steve Jones' pin-up girl sticker. The first thing that came into my mind when you asked that question was that theory that ducks imprint on the first thing they see when they're born. But it was the sound of the guitar. I remember the moment. It was when I heard *God Save The Queen* by the Sex Pistols. Just before the vocal comes back in, there's a deep string bend. That's when I thought, 'I want to make that sound.' I was thinking of Steve Jones on *I'm So Bored*, from the new album, trying to get some of his tone in there."

Do you remember your first guitar?
"It was a smaller-scale Strat copy my dad bought for my birthday. He was supportive but didn't like the noise – he encouraged me to play on headphones. I quickly upgraded to a black Satellite Les Paul copy because that's what Steve Jones played. I remember, I was riding to my friend's house to rehearse, on my mum's bike, with the guitar in a bin bag. Fell off in the rain and snapped the neck off it."

1. While John has traditionally preferred darker woods for his fretboards, the 2012's flame maple neck has changed his stance

2. All the way back to the Roses years, Squire has favoured the Strat vibrato system and often removes the vibrato cavity covers of his Fenders

> *"I wasn't prepared for the tone of the guitars to meld so well with Liam's vocals... It was a thousand-fold improvement"* JOHN SQUIRE

3. Having created guitars for Beck, Clapton and more, Todd Krause is the Fender master builder behind John's Custom Shop Strat

4. The Roses reunion shows at Finsbury Park in 2013 saw Squire play everything from a polka-dot Les Paul to this Strat inscribed with the *Waterfall* lyric

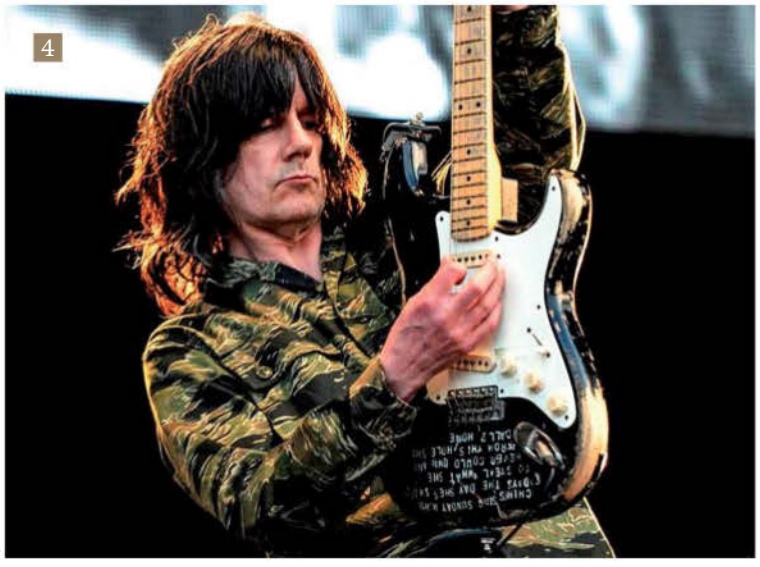


PHOTO BY BRIAN RASIC/GETTY IMAGES

There's a certain romance in those experiences, though.
"It didn't feel that way at the time!"

How did you start developing as a guitar player?
"The reason I started writing songs was because I struggled to play somebody else's stuff. I was really into Hendrix, and my dad modified a record player so I could slow it down. It put me into depressive moods because I did it for so long that I felt like the whole world was slowing down. But it demystified it a bit. It was like, 'Oh right, so it's just *that* – but a lot better and faster than you're doing it.' That gave me hope it was attainable. I spent a lot of time on *Red House*."

Did you aspire to be a guitar hero?
"I remember desiring that. Steve Jones had it written on his Fender Twin. And Joe Strummer says it in *Complete Control*, during Mick Jones' solo: 'You're my guitar hero.' But I don't think of myself in that way."

What are your favourite parts from the classic Roses albums?
"I particularly like the restraint towards the end of the *[I Am The] Resurrection* solo, with these single notes being played, just one note in a bar. *Going Down* has a micro-solo I really like. *Waterfall*, too. That came quite easy as well. They're always good, those ones, rather than beating your head against a wall. My eldest son, Dillon, is a singer-songwriter and when he was young he said he'd learnt to play *Waterfall*. He was jumping all over the neck, not using a capo. I said, 'This is how I do it.' And he watched me play it, and said, 'Yeah, I prefer it my way.'"

***Second Coming* is often held up as your most virtuoso playing – where are you now, relative to that?**
"Probably more measured and respectful. I wish I hadn't overdone the guitar on that second album. With this record, I've tried to keep out of the way of the vocal. This is a better guitar performance than the other records – and it should be, given the amount of years I've been playing."

Do you recognise yourself as a young player on those Roses albums?
"That choppy thing I do [plays the *Resurrection* outro], I'm still doing

Squire hasn't released studio material since the two Roses comeback singles of 2016, but ranks the *Gallagher/Squire* album among his most "satisfying" work

"Music can affect you. It can make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. I don't know another art form that can take you there" JOHN SQUIRE

that. I was in LA and this guy came running up and said, 'I can't believe you're here! I modelled my whole guitar style after you! I bought a Gretsch Country Gentleman and I do that funky thing.' I'm still using that trick and probably a lot of others."

The story goes that producer John Leckie didn't let you play that Gretsch on the first Roses album, so you used a pink 60s Strat?
"I think the feedback at the start of *I Wanna Be Adored* was done with that Gretsch. I dunno... that guitar sounded good on the demos to me, but he hated it."

"John is probably the best guitarist of his generation... he just dares to go places where most people would shit their pants" LIAM GALLAGHER

Your '59 Les Paul from *Second Coming* got sold – have you seen it since?
"It ended up back here recently. I was after buying a '59 and that one came back. I don't know a lot about them, but my guitar tech said there was a suspicion that the pickups had been swapped. It certainly didn't sound as good to me as it did when I had it in the Roses. I chose a '58 with a Bigsby over it. Those two Les Pauls turned up and we both agreed the '58 sounded better – and it hadn't been messed with. So that one is on *You're Not The Only One* and *I'm So Bored*."

The Roses took off in 1989. Is that explosion of fame all it's cracked up to be?
"Yeah, it's great. Does it come at a price? Only insofar as it never sustains. But there is that glorious period when you can do no wrong and you're surfing along, you've got loads of energy, you can stay up all night, you're meeting loads of new people. You're always travelling, getting new clothes, people giving you equipment."

The Roses made rock 'n' roll so visual, too. There were your iconic sleeves, the Jackson Pollocked guitars, the famous shoot where you were all covered in paint...
"Yeah. It turned out the red paint was corrosive and we ended up with welts all over us [smiles]."

5. Squire and Liam Gallagher first collaborated on The Seahorses' 1997 single, *Love Me And Leave Me* – although the guitarist remembers it as "more of a drinking session"

In the Noughties, you sang on two solo albums. Do you prefer just handling guitar?
"Yeah, I hated singing. I just felt that after [post-Roses group] The Seahorses fizzled out, I might as well have a go. I look back at it with some sense of pride that I had the bottle to do that. It's not really who I am. I don't want to be the centre of attention. I got through it. Learnt nothing from it."

The Roses reunited in 2011 but split again six years later. How frustrating was it that a new album didn't materialise?
"Well, no-one wanted to do it – so it turned out to not be that frustrating at all."

Back to the new album. You mentioned you and Liam have common ground?
"We both love The Beatles, the Pistols. He'd send me things like *Pretty Vacant* and Bob Marley. I sent him a Humble Pie track. Hendrix was swapped. He sent me the Bee Gees – I remember thinking, 'What the fuck?'"

How did the process work?
"I sang the songs – after a fashion – then tarted them up, buried them in reverb, did multiple takes and loads of editing to get them presentable, then sent them to Liam and he liked them. But it was a thousand-fold improvement when he got on them. I wasn't prepared for the tone of the guitars to meld so well with his vocals."

"HE'S OBVIOUSLY GOT A BIG PAIR OF BOLLOCKS..."

Liam Gallagher weighs in on John Squire's third coming

What does it mean to you to make an album with John Squire?
"I mean, obviously, without the Roses, I wouldn't be here. They got me on my musical path and that, so I thank them 24/7, you know what I mean? I was gonna have a year off after Knebworth, but when John rang up saying, 'Look, I've got these tunes,' I thought, 'I'm fucking in, mate.' There's only so much sitting about on the fucking sofa you can do. I love *Mother Nature's Song*, that slide bit towards the end. But listen, I love Squire, man. He's a shit-hot guitarist, probably the best of his generation. So I'm into it all."

Do you remember the first time you heard John Squire play guitar?
"I remember our kid [Noel Gallagher] bringing home *Sally Cinnamon*. That first Roses album blew my mind. The end of *I Am The Resurrection* – that's not been beat. *Standing Here. Where Angels Play*. Fucking *Waterfall*. I love all of it. Even *Second Coming* with *Begging You*. I wasn't a big fan of that song when it come out. I thought, 'What the fucking hell is this?' But as time has gone on, it's a tune, mate. *Fools Gold, Something's Burning* – I don't think he's played a shit riff, ever."

What makes John so good? His melodic instincts, his technical skill?
"Obviously all that – but he just dares to go places where most people would fucking shit their pants, you know what I mean? He's obviously got a big pair of bollocks, and that's how you get results, innit? It's like Hendrix – he was playing with his fucking teeth and that, while everyone else was still fucking strumming."

5

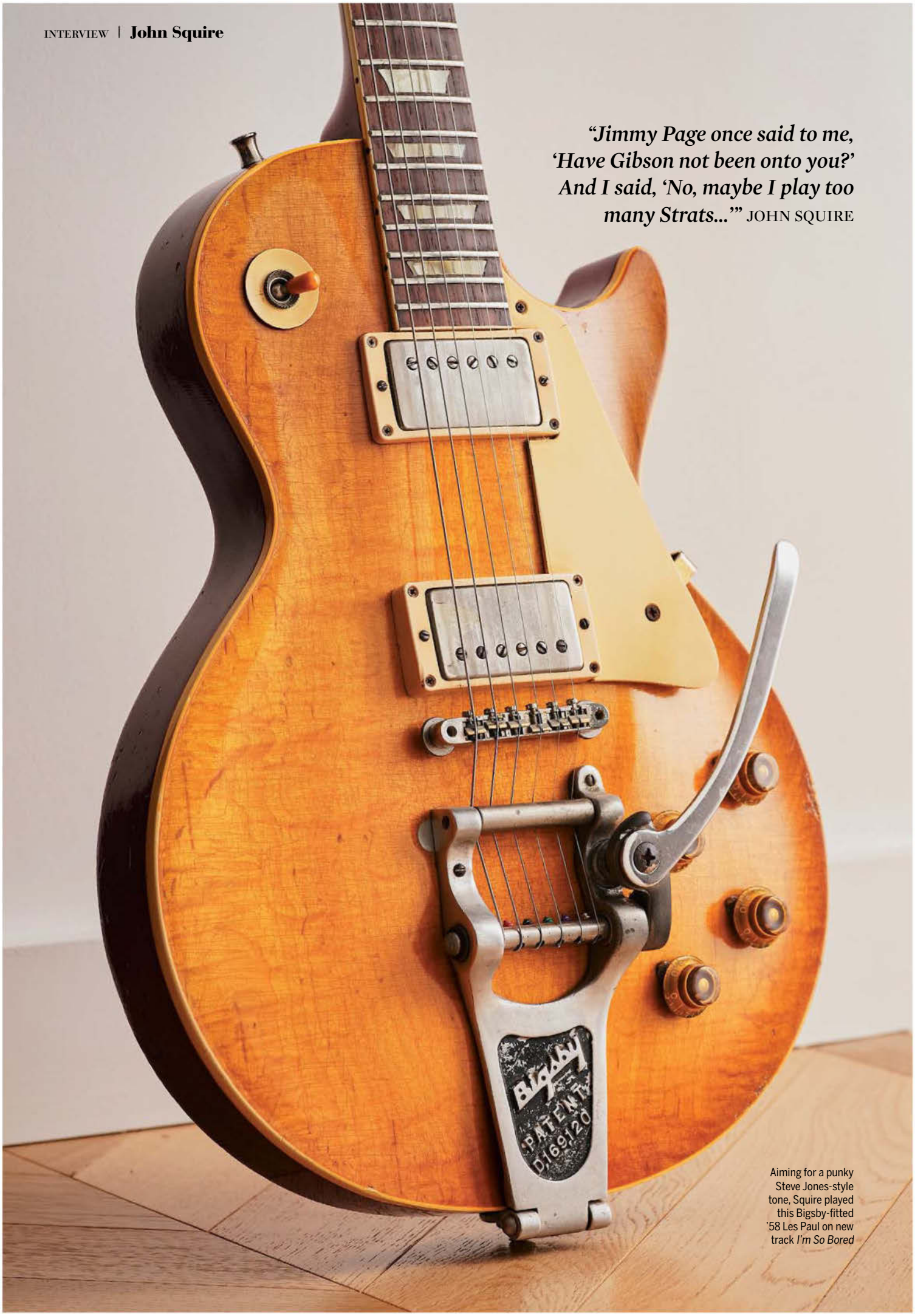
You and John seem like quite different people – why do you click?
"John's sharp, man. He's chilled, but he's got a little glint in his eye. Obviously, I'm a loudmouth fucking lunatic, but I'm pretty zen as well. I don't know why we click, man. But it's all about the music. It's not about going to the fucking pictures together and holding hands. I'm sure John's got enough friends. And I'm trying to fucking get rid of a few of mine."

How's your own guitar playing going?
"I keep it to myself. [Deadpan] I don't want to be showing him up and that, so I kept it low on this album. I don't play guitar, mate, I just do it to warm up my voice before a gig and every now and again a tune will pop up. But I don't sit about the house strumming. I'm a singer, man."

Was this an easy album to make?
"It was easy for me because all I had to do is sing. And I don't think making music should be that fucking hard. When people go on, like [tortured artist voice], 'I went to the depths of the universe to bring you this music.' Fuck off, man. We're not curing fucking cancer. We're making music. It's either good or it's bad."

PHOTO BY TOM OXLEY

"Jimmy Page once said to me, 'Have Gibson not been onto you?' And I said, 'No, maybe I play too many Strats...'" JOHN SQUIRE



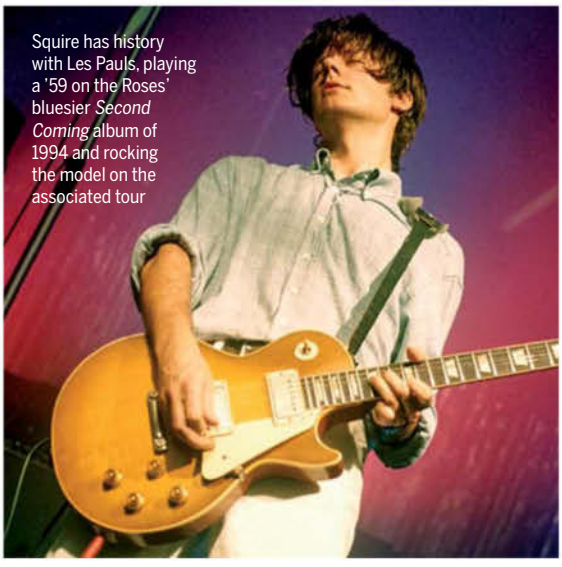
Aiming for a punky Steve Jones-style tone, Squire played this Bigsby-fitted '58 Les Paul on new track *I'm So Bored*

6. The '58 already bears the scars of over half a century's service – expect more dings when Squire takes the new material out on the road

7. Squire had the option of repurchasing his *Second Coming*-era '59, but preferred this '58 as it "hadn't been messed with"

8. The magic number: the first digit of the Les Paul's ink-stamped serial number confirms it as a survivor of the near-mythical class of '58

Do you usually nail your parts in one take?
"There were a couple where I did a lot of chipping away. Where I thought the track was gonna be in the toilet and we'd have to do it over the internet. *One Day At A Time* was a 'bits and pieces' song, but it came out really well. One of the last things I did was the solo on [first single] *Just Another Rainbow*. That was just one take and I really felt like I was in the moment there. I've been chasing a riff that works around open G for years – since The Seahorses, actually – because there's so many open strings you can mess around with. I played slide in standard tuning on this album, too; I've never done that before."



Squire has history with Les Pauls, playing a '59 on the Roses' bluesier *Second Coming* album of 1994 and rocking the model on the associated tour

PHOTO BY BRIAN RASIC/GETTY IMAGES

What was the most challenging part?
"*You're Not The Only One* was pretty tricky. I spent a bit of time composing and practising it. I struggle with some of the simple guitar parts, too. I don't know if it's my age, but I find some of them hard to retain. I know what the solos sound like – but I don't know what to do with my fingers."

That's the trouble with having such a big back catalogue...
"I've got a tiny catalogue!"

Don't you feel like an 'important British guitarist'?
"No. I don't think I'm famous. I don't think I'm a guitar hero. I feel like a dad."

The track *I'm A Wheel* sounds like classic blues...
"It's music that I love and it sounds great on the guitar, without a band, just on your own in a room. Blues just is what it is. It's pure. I think of Hendrix as a bluesman – he just drove it really hard, slapped loads of effects on it. But it's in there, innit?"

Do you think guitarists improve with age?
"I think you can always improve. Until arthritis gets in the way. A big part of what I consider a plateau that I built on was breaking a bone in my hand a few years ago. I was playing basketball with my younger son, used my right hand to break my fall and broke the bone at the base of my thumb. The specialist didn't know if I'd get full function back. So I had the cast on, my fingers were set about a centimetre apart and I got a plectrum and glued some thick rubber either side so I could hold it. I tried to play – and it was terrible. And I went spinning into thinking I might not ever play again."

As a guitarist, how much of an existential crisis is that?
"Well, I also like to paint and spread margarine on toast. But it was sobering."

Is there any area of your playing you'd still like to improve?
"All of them. I'm driven by failure. When I listen to my stuff, I tend to focus on the imperfections. Even with an album like this, where it's generally very satisfying, I'll focus in on the things that aren't quite right. But I do that with painting as well. I do it if someone comes in and puts up new light switches."

You once said you don't know much about guitars. And now?
"I've picked up a little bit, but when I meet someone like Barrie Cadogan from Little Barrie – he used to work on Denmark Street and he always wants to geek out about guitars, but I can't really help him."

What guitars did you use on the Gallagher/Squire album?
"It was mostly this red 2012 Strat.

9. Squire admits to not having "particularly strong hands", but found this 1970 Gibson Hummingbird's low action and slender neck made for painless fretting

10. As the luthier's first square-shouldered dreadnought, the original Hummingbird of 1960 broke with Gibson's long tradition of slope-shoulder body styling

11. Another key reason why Squire chose the Hummingbird for *Gallagher/Squire* was how well this particular model projects its sound

12. Pictured playing the Cambridge Corn Exchange with the Roses in 1995, Squire lays down his Les Paul for a more intimate acoustic moment

"I read about The Stones loving Hummingbirds – I love that sound. That's the acoustic on every track on this new album" JOHN SQUIRE

PHOTO BY BRIAN RASIC/GETTY IMAGES

It's a Todd Krause Custom Shop and the inscription is from *Fools Gold*. I bought it during the Roses reunion and it was a hotel guitar because it always sounded a bit puny. But it was just in this room when I started writing the album. I knew I was going on holiday during the writing period, so I thought, 'Why don't I get a mobile system together?' To keep it simple, I didn't use any [effects] boxes. I did it all with AmpliTube. And when I tried that Strat it just all fell into place. I had a '57 Tobacco Burst Strat, too – and it was dogshit compared with that new one. It's mainly the tone. On the rhythm pickup, it sounded mega. I always used to prefer darker woods, but it's got a flame maple neck. That guitar is on every track. There's a little bit in the *Rainbow* solo where I doubled that with a Firebird, just like a one-bar phrase that stands out."

What can you tell us about the 1970 Hummingbird that we're shooting today?

"That's the acoustic on every track on this new album. I read on a Gibson forum about The Stones loving Hummingbirds – and I love the sound of Stones acoustics. I was intrigued by the name and they look cool. I did a bit of research, saw one online that looked to be in good shape and just tried it on spec, without physically playing it. I loved it immediately. Usually, when I play acoustic, because I've not got particularly strong hands, I struggle to sustain a note because you have to put so much pressure on. This one, I don't know how they've done it, but it's got a really slender neck, low action, really projects its sound. I don't know if they're all like that or I just got lucky."

Are there any Roses guitars you regret letting go?

"My wife showed me a clip on Instagram from Denmark Street Guitars, saying the '73 Telecaster Custom I used for *Waterfall* on the Roses reunion was available. I'd forgotten I'd got rid of it. I thought about buying it back."

Why have you never designed a signature model?

"No-one's asked me. Jimmy Page once said to me, 'Have Gibson not been onto you?' And I said, 'No, maybe I play too many Strats.' Jimmy said, 'Yeah, probably.' I think it's more likely to be that they don't know who I am."

You used a Fender Twin with JBL speakers for the first Roses album. Did you have a traditional amp for the Gallagher/Squire sessions?

"Yeah. For the demos, we used plug-ins. For the sessions at Greg Kurstin's studio in LA, we used physical amps. Greg had everything I had, so there was no need to ship anything out. I used his AC30 and modified Marshall JMP 50-watt Master Volume. In fact, we cloned

11

them before we left. There were a few pedals knocking about – I forget what they were now [Squire anticipates his live rig will include the Electro-Harmonix Stereo Memory Man, Xotic RC Booster, Neo Instruments Ventilator II and a Vintage Pedal Workshop FET preamp made by Steve Giles]."

Do you tend to keep up with guitar technology?

"No. I find all that stuff [frustrating]. I get stuff working and then five years later, everything is obsolete and it's a major crisis. I will be using the Kemper Profiler with in-ears live. I was talked into that by my tech because of the advantage it gives the sound guy, getting a clean sound, because there's no bleed. There will be real cabs on stage, though, because Liam likes to hear the guitar."

Why do you think music keeps pulling you back in?

"Because it's so powerful. In the studio, when we played back the finished mixes of *Mother Nature's Song*, me and Liam both admitted to welling up. So music can affect you that way. It can be uplifting. It can make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. I don't know another art form that can take you there." G

Gallagher/Squire is released on 1 March via Parlophone
www.gallaghersquire.com

QUALITY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
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HISTORY REPEATING

Gibson's highest-tier replicas of famous Les Pauls are commanding almost as much as vintage guitars these days. We find out what all the fuss is about and examine a rare recreation of Jimmy Page's fiendishly complex #2 Les Paul Standard

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis

One of the most striking developments in the guitar market has been the emergence of high-end Les Pauls that command the kind of prices that, just a few years ago, original 60s or even 50s examples used to cost. Built as part of limited-run ranges such as the Collector's Choice series, such guitars are not simply aged to resemble generic 'Bursts of the golden era but are crafted to closely resemble specific celebrated guitars – from the instruments Jimmy Page used with Led Zeppelin to 'Bursts that have no artist associations but have become known among collectors as particularly fine examples of Gibson's late-50s and early 60s handiwork.

Not simply reissues, Gibson's Custom Shop Artist and Collector's Choice guitars (the latter is now discontinued) are therefore better understood as factory replicas – timepieces that are also right at the top of the tree in terms of build quality. Debuting at roughly the same time as Fender's Relic Custom Shop guitars, Gibson's aged replicas of famous Les Pauls first appeared in the 1990s and one could argue that early examples are now hovering at the edge of 'vintage' status themselves, being around 30 years old. All the same, you'd be forgiven a sharp intake of breath when looking at the prices the most sought-after examples of such guitars now command, which can be upwards of £20,000.

To be fair, most are considerably less expensive but still command prices well north of conventional R9s and the like. We were mulling these matters when Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in *Guitarist*'s home city of Bath told us they had quite a few nice examples in stock, if we wanted to take a look? We did, and while we were there seeing what all the fuss was about (see box on page 83), we took the opportunity to quiz the store's manager, Steve Hove, about why top-tier artist-affiliated and replica Les Pauls seem to be growing into a market in themselves – cheaper than vintage but among the priciest (and most desirable) modern-built Les Pauls you can get.

"Yeah, they certainly have risen," Steve Hove says. "But they were expensive to begin with and they were made in limited numbers. And, obviously, some of them are Murphy Aged and some of them are signed by the artist as well, and so on. So there are different tiers even among the Artist models. I think when they were announced, the dealers would sell out pretty quick; all the orders were fulfilled pretty swiftly. And then you've got a situation where people who missed out... there's a natural kind of demand increase and a lack of supply. So, over the years, we've seen prices rise, particularly for models like the Jimmy Page, and some of the more famous ones like Pearly Gates, and some rarer ones as well, like the Mark Knopfler."

Seeing Double

Unsurprisingly, it was the desire to forensically recreate famous guitars used by celebrated players that first kick-started Gibson's efforts to make Les Paul reissues that didn't just capture the general look, spec and feel of vintage instruments – but replicated every idiosyncratic detail of specific Les Pauls, as Gibson's vice president of product and *de facto* historian, Mat Koehler, explains.

"There was a progression of projects that were inspired by originals and those that sought to replicate them exactly," Mat explains. "But, generally speaking, the start of all that was the late 1990s. Other than Les Paul himself, our first signature model on the Les Paul platform was the Jimmy Page Les Paul Standard in 1995. I hate to use this term, but it was a 'synergistic' thing in the 1990s – we developed a robust artist relations team just as the Custom Shop proper was forming and just as Tom Murphy began experimenting with ageing. Put them together and you get the first Artist Model recreations."

The other factor that's driven up the desirability of replica-grade Les Pauls is more practical. Original 50s 'Bursts typically sell for six-figure sums, which puts them in a different universe of unattainability even compared with vintage Fender electrics of the same era. And yet the mystique of the 'Burst has never been

"It's the [replicas] with the higher-profile artist associations that tend to attract the big money"

STEVE HOVE

The Jimmy Page #2 Les Paul Standard is one of the most sought-after replicas Gibson has made – and the most complex

1. The Les Pauls used by Jimmy Page, including his so-called #2 LP Standard, provided the springboard for Gibson's modern-day efforts to replicate specific famous guitars

2. The #2's switching options include series /parallel and phase reversal switches under the scratchplate and on push-pull volume pots, plus coil-splits on the push-pull tone pots

3. With detailed ageing and replication of the original guitar's finish and figured woods, the Jimmy Page #2 is right at the peak of desirability among replica-grade guitars

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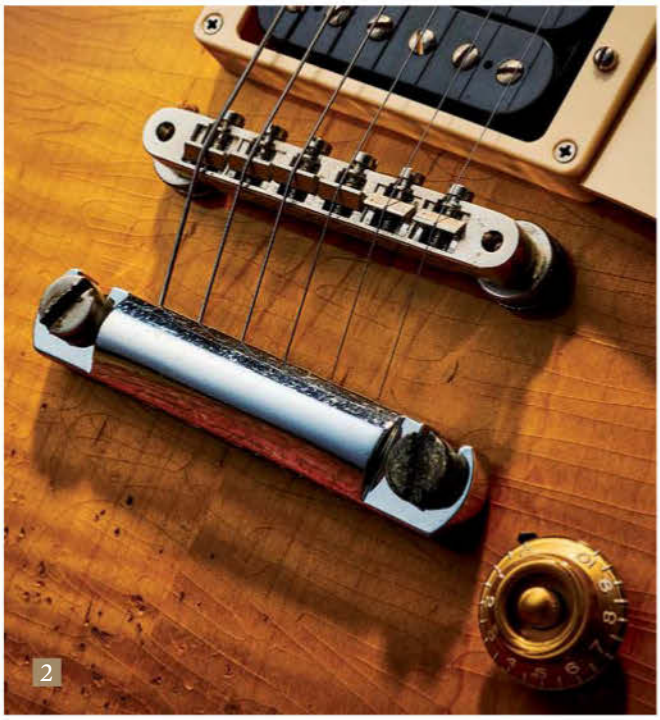
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more powerful, which means there is huge demand but effectively zero supply.

In that context, the formidably salty prices of aged Les Pauls based on specific original guitars become more explicable; they are as close as most of us are ever going to be able to get to owning not just a vintage Les Paul but a famous one, even though they represent a very serious investment in their own right. The fact that they are still in demand among buyers partly reflects the fact that there simply aren't any genuine vintage options for under 10 grand that get you in the same ballpark.

"Vintage stuff has risen a lot in the last three or four years," says Steve Hove. "So there's really not that much you can find for that kind of price level in terms of 50s Les Pauls – you'd be looking at Juniors, essentially. And even those are going for five figures now. Obviously, inflation has driven that a fair amount. But there's just a real demand for vintage gear."

Steve adds that the kind of players who buy the highest-tier 'Burst replicas don't tend to gravitate towards early 70s Les Paul Customs that might fall within an equivalent price range (or even be somewhat cheaper), despite the fact that the best examples can be incredible instruments. They're simply too different from the hallowed template of the original 'Burst to scratch that itch, and their 'vintage' status can even be a turn-off for some buyers.

"We find that it's two quite different buyers for each of those things," Steve Hove reflects. "When you enter into the vintage world, there are a lot more factors to consider. You need to be a bit more careful in terms of buying stuff that's original and is what it says it is. So a lot of people like the idea of something that is made quite recently and yet with a specific collector's market in mind. If it's something that you're looking to tour and gig with, often modern instruments can be a bit more reliable in that respect – they don't need quite the same level of TLC as vintage instruments. So I think they're two fairly separate markets, although there are obviously similarities."

So the market for replica-grade Les Pauls was not wholly created by people being priced out of the mainstream vintage market. Rather like Goldilocks choosing the bowl of porridge that felt 'just right', some buyers clearly felt standard Custom Shop recreations of 'Bursts – as good as R8s, R9s and the like typically are – weren't quite special enough.

Once again, the urge to get closer and closer to the real thing while still keeping at least the tip of one toe in the real world, in terms of price, led to a strata of guitars that today sit comfortably above the prices of standard Custom Shop instruments (and the lower end of vintage market) yet remain hundreds of thousands of pounds cheaper than the guitars they are based on. Again, supply, demand and cachet have acted to create a gap in the market. And where there is a gap in the market – even quite high up – it's not long before someone comes up with a plan to fill it. Which is where Gibson's Collector's Choice Les Pauls came in, Steve Hove explains.

"Jimmy's #2 definitely has to be one of the most complex recreations in Gibson history"

MAT KOEHLER

4. The compact Sperzel tuners on the Melvyn Franks/Gary Moore model reflect mods made to Greeny over the years – a detail typical of the Collector's Choice series instruments

5. Judiciously aged hardware and custom-wired Gibson Burstbucker pickups add further depth to the replication of Peter Green's legendary Les Paul Standard

4

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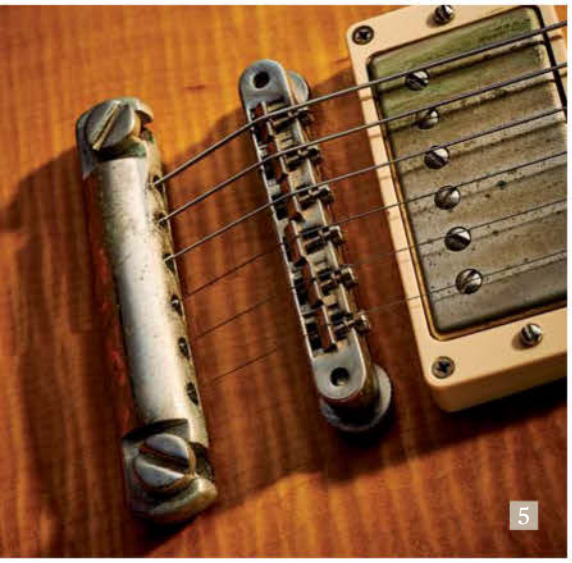
Collector's Choice

"Gibson has produced quite a lot of VOS reissues and Custom Shop reissues of '58, '59 and '60 'Bursts over the years, so there can be quite a few to choose from if you're in the market for one of those, which is kind of reflected in the values. I think there are some good prices to be had. So the Collector's Choice guitars, because they were made in limited runs and were at the top of what Gibson offered, are in a different category. They're kind of their own market in themselves, really. They're not just cool guitars, but they've typically got an artist association or an association with a [specific] original 'Burst, like [the] 'Minnesota', for example, or 'Henry's Goldtop'. They're great things with cool stories behind them."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"Trying to match the subtle nuances of a 'burst that has faded is a long and difficult process"

MAT KOEHLER

The Gibson Custom Collector's Choice #1 VOS Melvyn Franks/Gary Moore 1959 Les Paul Standard Reissue kicked off what is now a long-ish line of 'Greeny' replicas

"Collector's Choice was built on the idea of authentic recreations for a fraction of the price of the originals"
MAT KOEHLER

A beautiful 2017 Gibson Collector's Choice #43A Mick Ralphs '58 Les Paul Standard True Historic Spec. The Collector's Choice series, which debuted in 2015, has now been discontinued

Gibson's Mat Koehler sheds a little more light on the Collector's Choice range, which debuted in 2015 but is now discontinued.

"It developed based on the friends and artists that Rick Gembar, Edwin Wilson and Tom Murphy were working with at the time and the requests of our dealers and customers," Mat explains. "It's value proposition 101: the originals are extremely valuable and extremely coveted; Collector's Choice was built on the idea of authentic recreations for a fraction of the price of the originals."

The Collector's Choice guitars were notable in that, instead of relying on the legend of an artist, they were mainly based on surviving original 'Bursts that had become well known among collectors as particularly fine examples of Gibson's 50s output. As such, the Collector's Choice guitars seemed to acknowledge that public interest in 'Bursts, as an era-defining design, has grown over time until certain original guitars acquired a kind of celebrity in their own right, up to and including receiving individual nicknames.

"There are some very famous 'Bursts that weren't necessarily associated with artists, which are kind of their own thing like 'Sandy', for example," Steve Hove explains. "Then you get guitars that are just really nice examples of originals, like the 'Minnesota' or 'Dutchburst', which are great guitars that don't have an artist association as such."

For all that, however, the appeal of playing a guitar exactly like the ones played by one's heroes is still the biggest draw in the high-end Les Paul market, Steve adds.

7

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6. Thin finishes using special nitro formulations, aniline dyes for accurate colours, exacting wood selection and period-accurate lacquer checking formed part of the authenticity of True Historic-spec guitars

7. The Collector's Choice guitars were replicas of specific, celebrated vintage 'Bursts

8. True Historic spec has today evolved into guitars designated as 'Custom Shop Historic' and 'Murphy Lab' models

LES PAUL VIDEO SHOOTOUT

If you fancy seeing and hearing some of the guitars featured in this piece being played alongside a genuine 'Burst, you're in luck as *Guitarist* recently roped in stellar guitarist Chris Buck of Cardinal Black to put them through their paces in an Ultimate Les Paul Shootout with our very own Richard Barrett. Head on over to YouTube (via the case-sensitive link below) to watch the whole 90-minute thriller in full.

https://bit.ly/BuckLPshootout

> *"In terms of collectibility, it's always best for these to remain as original as possible"*
>
> **STEVE HOVE**

"It's the [replicas] with the higher-profile artist associations that tend to attract the big money, as we mentioned earlier – things like your Pearly Gates and your Jimmy Pages," Steve Hove agrees, pointing to the example of the stunning Jimmy Page #2 Les Paul Standard that is currently on display at Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars.

"It's a great-looking example. We've had a couple of these in recent years, but the colour on the sunburst and the flame top of this particular one is really, really nice. Because they do all vary. Gibson will try to choose the woods that are closest to the original as they can, but there's inherently gonna be a bit of variety. But this is a really nice one. It's a nice weight and it looks very cool, too."

As well as its Zep associations, the Jimmy Page #2 also has a unique number of switching options, offering everything from full-fat Les Paul tones to out-of-phase settings and coil-splits (see captions), operated by push-pull pots and push-buttons beneath the scratchplate. It's difficult enough to tease apart quite what everything does, let alone make one, we suggest to Gibson's Mat Koehler, who said this of the fiendishly complex electronics:

"That guitar was before my time, but I am familiar with it and the story – and, yes, it was based on the exact modifications that Jimmy did to his #2 LP later in his career... down to the exact types of switches and pots and wiring," Mat says. "Did Jimmy actually use all that stuff? My understanding is after doing all the mods to his original, he still used only its basic functions. Regardless, it was *not* easy to recreate all that – there were so many unique parts. It definitely has to be one of the most complex recreations in Gibson history."

Shades Of History

Yet while complex wiring looms may present their own challenges, at least they are designed around replicable component values and circuits. What's sometimes harder, Mat says, is matching the visual appearance of famous guitars to a high degree of accuracy.

"The first big challenge [in making replica guitars] that comes to mind is colour!" Mat tells us. "Trying to match the subtle nuances of a 'burst that has faded is a long and difficult process and you absolutely need to compare resulting physical samples to the physical guitar because, as you know, red – and shades thereof – always shows up differently in photos. Outside of that, achieving consistency throughout a given run of instruments is always a challenge, too; they all need to be clones, but we also have to have a realistic tolerance for difference."

Perhaps the biggest difficulty is in matching the appearance of heavily figured tops, as seen on some of Paul Kossoff's former Les Pauls, among others.

"That is another rabbit-hole topic," Mat admits. "But I have to give huge props to my late friend Edwin Wilson who was so adamant about matching tops for any applicable run of instruments that he would personally select them all over a period of days and weeks, sorting through thousands of billets. We do that today, but we have more help! Of course, there is no such thing as matching a unique organic pattern exactly, but to use a fingerprint metaphor, you begin to see similarities in the swirls and lines and scale of the patterns."

Perhaps the final way in which high-end replicas mirror the vintage originals, however, is that, due to their collectibility, it's wise to keep their pickups and hardware factory original, just as you might with a genuine 50s 'Burst, says Steve Hove.

"They were built to a certain spec and Gibson spent a lot of time recreating specific sounds and specific looks. So I think it's very important they stay as original as they can. But it depends on the purpose, you know? Everyone is different. If someone's buying one to play and gig, they might prefer the sound of other pickups or slightly different hardware because it's more suitable to them – and obviously that's totally up to them. But in terms of collectibility, it's always best for them to remain as original as possible and in as good [and complete] a condition as possible. The more ephemera and documentation you've got with these things, the better it is," he concludes.

With thanks to Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath for showing us these incredible guitars
www.vintageandrareguitars.com

TONE
VOL

Custom Dreams

With guitars seemingly getting more expensive by the day, is a bespoke build now just a thing for the very well-off? We go in search of a more affordable route. Power to the people!

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

VINTAGE PROSHOP V72 CUSTOM BUILD £1,299

CONTACT **John Hornby Skewes** PHONE **01132 865381** WEB **www.vintageguitarsrus.com**

What You Need To Know

1 What's the deal?
Simple: the UK ProShop takes a standard Vintage lookalike and upgrades it, typically with an aged-looking nitro finish and premium parts. Originally, these were just one-off Unique builds, conceived by the ProShop team, but now they offer a custom-build service, too.

2 Your build is a lot more expensive than the standard model.
Yes, as we explain, our build is based on the Vintage Reissued V72 that retails just under £500. However, our build actually needed a purpose-made body, a custom handmade control plate, a custom-shaped scratchplate, not to mention Wilkinson R Series pickups, boutique-quality electrics and, of course, a complete aged refinish.

3 Does it have to be reliced?
No, you can choose what finish style and colour you want. However, the ProShop's manager, Nathan Sharp, does tell us that around 95 per cent of their orders are for aged-looking guitars.

How many times have you looked at or played a new guitar that you really like only to find out that you can't buy it in the colour you want? Or you've fallen for a guitar's charms with one exception: its neck shape. On it goes, but increasingly this one-size-fits-all approach is a prerequisite of the modern production guitar, wherever it's made. Options, even on some pretty pricey production instruments, aren't usually expansive, to say the least, and before you know it you're shown the Custom Shop route and a final price that is simply out of reach. It doesn't help if you like your guitars to look like they've had a bit of a previous life; relicing and ageing will add another level to that price. Just ask Tom Murphy.

Affordability, however, has always been the key proposition for John Hornby Skewes' Vintage brand: lookalike guitars for the masses. The thing is, they can play rather well and sound rather good for the cash, not least with a little after-purchase tweakery or modding. But the Vintage ProShop concept – which was started by the brand's USA distributor then adopted in the UK in 2020 – takes things a little further by creating customised and often relic'd versions of the standard models.

Initially made as one-off Uniques, or small limited runs for its worldwide dealership network, in mid-2023 the UK ProShop introduced a custom-build service and, based on one of the standard Vintage models, you can now spec the details,

1. This 'cut-off' bridge started life as a full-size Wilkinson T-style bridge until the ProShop got its saw out. The intonated Wilkinson Duplo saddles have also been aged

2

the finish, parts and pickups, and create a custom guitar you can actually afford.

Of the Unique builds we've seen so far we've been impressed with the craft for the cost. And if the ProShop can really make what *you* want, it's worth consideration, isn't it? We put it to the test...

Starting Point

The first thing you need to do is narrow down your choice of T, S, JM, LP, SG-style models in the Vintage ranges. Although we've played plenty of those models over the years, the V72 is a new one to us: a chambered T-style with a single f-hole. The ProShop configurator on the website is simply a series of drop-down menus to choose from, and gradually we dialled in our custom specification.

Inspired by plenty of boutique builds that we'd been eye-balling on Instagram, in basic terms we decided on a lightly aged finish, with a cut-off T-style bridge, a PAF-y style humbucker at the bridge with a P-90 in the neck position. We also fancied something a bit more bespoke, requesting an aluminium control plate with a three-way toggle switch replacing the usual lever, a partial coil-split for the bridge humbucker and some witch-hat (as opposed to Telecaster) knobs.

While Vintage makes heavy use of Wilkinson hardware and pickups, having tested and been impressed by Trev's upmarket R Series pickups last year we thought we'd keep things in the family, selecting a Caliber 5257 soapbar single coil for the neck and a Caliber 5761 PAF-alike humbucker in the bridge position with that coil-split for good measure.

Once your order is submitted, the ProShop team can take a look and fine-tune any potential problems and price it up. They consulted Trev Wilkinson on the pickup choice and, as the bridge pickup we'd suggested is only available with a vintage-style hook-up cable, he suggested the slightly higher output Caliber 7484 (see Under The Hood over the page) as that comes standard with the necessary four-conductor hook-up wire and should give a stronger single coil-split. They also suggested using the compensated brass Wilkinson Duplo saddles – and, on paper, we were done. We confirmed our order in late August 2023 and pretty much three months to the day, an unassuming cardboard box arrived.

2. Because we ordered this Wilkinson R Series P90 for the neck position, the ProShop had to get a new body made up. To continue the aged appearance, the pickup covers for this soapbar and the covered bridge humbucker are also treated

Our first impression of our new custom build is that the UK ProShop team has raised its level

THE RIVALS

We're not aware of any other mass-market manufacturer offering anything like the ProShop service. That said, plenty of makers use third-party necks and bodies, such as Kauffmann's Guitar Store whose vibey, vintage-style builds cost upwards of around £2k.

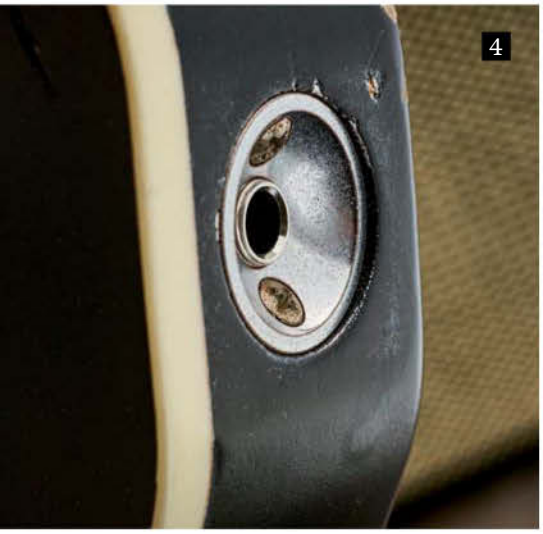
Gordon Smith's UK builds can be custom-ordered from a wide range of options. Its Classic T, for example, starts at £999, but you can choose various neck and body woods, neck profiles, hardware, pickups and finish all priced up on GSG's website configurator.

Maybury's Upscaler concept isn't a million miles away from the ProShop – Jason Snelling turns reclaimed wood (for the body), a pre-loved neck, pickups and parts into a unique build. These can be custom-ordered and start from around £900.

Of course, it's getting easier by the day to create your own 'custom', even if you have limited lutherie skills. There are some very good kits: Wilkinson's range is highly recommended and its 60s spec T-style kit costs under £400, or the more adventurous can easily access pre-made necks and bodies from the likes of Guitarbuild (www.guitarbuild.co.uk) or Guitar And Bass Build (guitarandbassbuilds.com) in the UK and load on the pickups and hardware of your choice. There are plenty of people offering relic/aged finishing, too, like Golden Era whose vintage-accurate necks and bodies have a well-earned reputation for quality and craft.

3. Fender amp knobs and a Gibson-style toggle pickup selector mounted on this bespoke aged aluminium control plate all contribute to the boutique style of the custom build

4. One of the many non-standard details is this Electrosocket mounting for the output jack – a typical mod many players carry out on their T-styles



The Reveal

Having just evaluated one of Vintage's 2023 ProShop Unique builds, the Black Icon, as an introduction to this piece in our last issue's Wishlist, the heavily beaten T-style with Bigsby certainly impressed, not least that it costs £1,199 with a smart gigbag, a quality leather strap, a pick box and certificate of authenticity, and even a T-shirt included. Our first impression of our new custom build is that the UK ProShop team has raised its level. Whether it's the less-distressed finish, that boutique-y control plate or the cut-off bridge, it's hard to say, but we'd wager if we had a 'cool' category in our ratings, it'd achieve a good score.

The lightly aged body finish looks like it's been around a bit and we have a similar vibe to the dark-stained neck finish, creating the illusion an old guitar that's been played a lot but not abused. The white binding is all cleanly scraped around the top edge of the body, plus we get some nice touches like the circular Electrosocket output jack surround. In fact, the hardware is all nicely done in terms of its light ageing, even if the control plate looks like it might have been custom-cut from weathered material; it's only the metalwork on that toggle switch that looks a little new, as if it might have been recently replaced mid-tour. Again, like that previous Black Icon, the scratchplate looks a little new, but that'd be easily sorted.

Feel & Sounds

Irrespective of the visual appeal, it's the feel and weight that immediately impress. At 3.09kg (6.8lb), thanks to that cambered body, it's almost 20 per cent lighter than that previous Black Icon with Bigsby we had on the scales. In typical T-style, there's no body contouring, although the heel has a rounded nose and a neckplate to match. Strapped on or seated, this is a comfortable piece, a guitar you want to play anywhere.

Dimensionally, the neck is a little wider at the nut than a few old Fenders we've evaluated at 43.4mm, while the depth is closer to 'old Fender' in the lower positions – 21.8mm at the 1st fret and filling out but not overbig by the 12th at 24.4mm. The standard V72's neck profile is described as a 'soft C', but this feels more like a 'full C' with relatively broad shoulders. The neck back is smooth in feel, less satin than some with a slight texture that will probably burnish up with playing. Again, though, it simply feels like an already well-used vintage bolt-on.

The rosewood fingerboard has a 254mm (10-inch) radius and a good deep colour; the top edges are very nicely rounded, appearing almost scalloped in higher positions. Frets are of a medium jumbo size, reasonably wide but not overhigh (2.73mm wide by 1mm high), and it's strung with 10s and a mainstream string height of 1.5mm on the treble side, just under 1.8mm on the

5. The ProShop team started with an unfinished neck before recreating some ageing and applying the new logos

bass side. Regardless of the price, there's some excellent work here and it's a really nice player. To be very picky indeed, the nut could be rounded a little more to meet Seth Baccus-like boutique standards, but the strings' grooves are perfectly cut. We ain't complaining.

Now, all of this illusion and craft is wasted if the guitar doesn't sound as good as its apparent use suggests. There's a lively T-style bright-edged ring as you'd expect unplugged, and just plugged in on the neck P-90 things are immediately encouraging:

ProShop builds are aimed at a real world where the escalating cost of premium pieces can be very hard, or impossible, to justify

there's a very full-toned jazzy/blues voice here – and a hint of hollowbody – with the volume pulled back a little, and a much more forceful, clear but thick voice with the wick turned up.

We were slightly worried that the hot bridge humbucker might be a little too 'rock', but it actually sounds more hot-vintage to us and – helped by the placement a little away from the bridge saddles – it has a clear and very subtly rounded high-end and enough kick and a slightly punkier edge

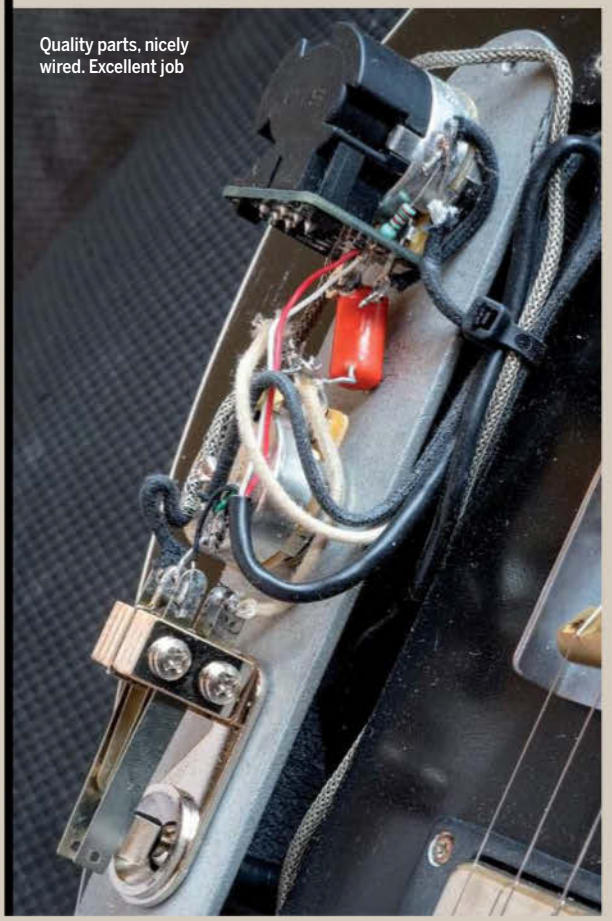
UNDER THE HOOD

Does the quality continue on the inside?

Take a look at the insides of any boutique-level guitar and you'll invariably see quality components and cloth-covered wire all very tidily done. It's part of the craft, not least if you're paying £3k upwards. The control circuit here, which was specified as part of the custom build, definitely belongs to one of those guitars: a Switchcraft toggle switch, CTS 500kohm audio taper volume and the PCB-style CTS 500k pull-pot for the tone. There's an Orange Drop .022µF cap in there, too, along with a 2.2k resistor to achieve the partial split of the bridge humbucker, PRS style.

As to those pickups, the Wilkinson R Series Caliber 5257 is apparently based on a P-90 from a Gibson ES-125 owned by Trev and uses "an original-style bent nickel silver backing plate and wooden spacers under its rough cast Alnico V bar magnets, wound with AWG.42 plain enamel wire". It has a measured DCR of 5.77k at output and is direct-mounted to the body, too.

Our first selection at the bridge was the very-PAF-alike Caliber 5761, but that is only available with single conductor hook-up, no good to split. Trev had suggested the 7484 and we'd assumed that would be the 43AWG 14.5k bridge version, although, as we mention in our sound test, it didn't sound like that! Cleverly, Trev had sent over the *neck* pickup, 42 AWG with a measured DCR of 9.55k, and 6.32k when split, which reflects the 'hot vintage' style that we hear. Wire gauge aside, both 7484s use an Alnico V magnet with nickel silver backplates and covers and four-conductor hook-up.



Quality parts, nicely wired. Excellent job

Another nice detail is the rounded nose to the heel with its matching neckplate. Like all the hardware, the ProShop team ages the parts in-house

for really rootsy styles, not to mention some dirtier classic rock. The coil-split, which actually voices the screw coil, is a surprise. It's definitely a third, very usable voice – a strong T-style or almost early PAF-like voice that has bite and a wiry focus. It's far from a thin anaemic option that you'd rarely use. A classic pickup pairing, three very strong sounds with very soulful, classic mixes. What's not to like?

Verdict

This is a very endearing, characterful instrument: it's a guitar that looks and feels old, played-in and used but is perfectly fit for purpose. Its sounds are almost timeless, from authentic late-50s jazz/blues on the neck soapbar through gritty 60s jangle from the mixes when pushed; you'll also find rather beautiful soul and funk played cleaner. With the coil-split engaged, a highly usable duality at the bridge provides Fender-y single-coil attack, plus a very well-voiced full bridge humbucker that brings in some muscle. It's an unshowy piece, a perfect gigging partner that'd sit in pretty much any band you could imagine.

But players who have owned and played a string of high-end, high-quality contemporary instruments, or good vintage pieces, aren't really the target audience here. Instead, these ProShop builds – the Unique one-offs or our custom build – are aimed at a real world where the escalating cost of those premium pieces is very hard for the majority to justify, and for many even impossible.

Its sounds are almost timeless, from authentic late-50s jazz/blues on the neck soapbar to gritty 60s jangle from the mixes

Does our custom build match the detailed quality of the Fender Custom Shop or numerous premier small-'shop builders? No. But can the ProShop team take a competent (if rather generic) guitar and turn it into a more unique instrument with a characterful aged finish and your choice of pickups and parts? Definitely. More simple makeovers, or a less convoluted custom request, would cost you considerably less, too, yet you'll still be getting a totally unique and fit-for purpose instrument – and if you choose the custom-build route, it's *your* design, too. What would yours be? G

VINTAGE PROSHOP V72 CUSTOM BUILD

PRICE: £1,299 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Built in the UK
TYPE: Single-cutaway thinline electric
BODY: Alder, chambered
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech NuBone/43.4mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearloid dot inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Wilkinson cut-off T-style bridge with compensated brass Duplo saddles; Wilkinson WJ55 split-post vintage-style tuners – aged nickel/chrome plating
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: Wilkinson R Series Caliber 7484 covered humbucker (bridge); Caliber 5257 soapbar single coil (neck), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone (w/ partial coil-split switch)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.09/6.8
OPTIONS: Check the Vintage ProShop website for custom build options plus a range of available Unique builds priced from £749 to £1,999
RANGE OPTIONS: In the standard non-ProShop Vintage Reissued range the V72 (£489) features a T-style bridge with single coil and a neck mini-humbucker. The V72H features dual humbuckers and a hardtail through-strung bridge. Both are available in Flame Tobacco Burst only
LEFT-HANDERS: To order
FINISHES: Lightly aged, low-gloss Black over White nitro to body – lightly aged acrylic sealer neck finish

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Excellent interpretation of our custom order; superb neck, fingerboard and fretwork; very good Wilkinson R Series pickups; a very endearing old, played-in vibe

CONS The scratchplate does look a little new and some of the finish details aren't as period-accurate as some, but we're splitting hairs: the feel, sounds, playability and vibe are all superb

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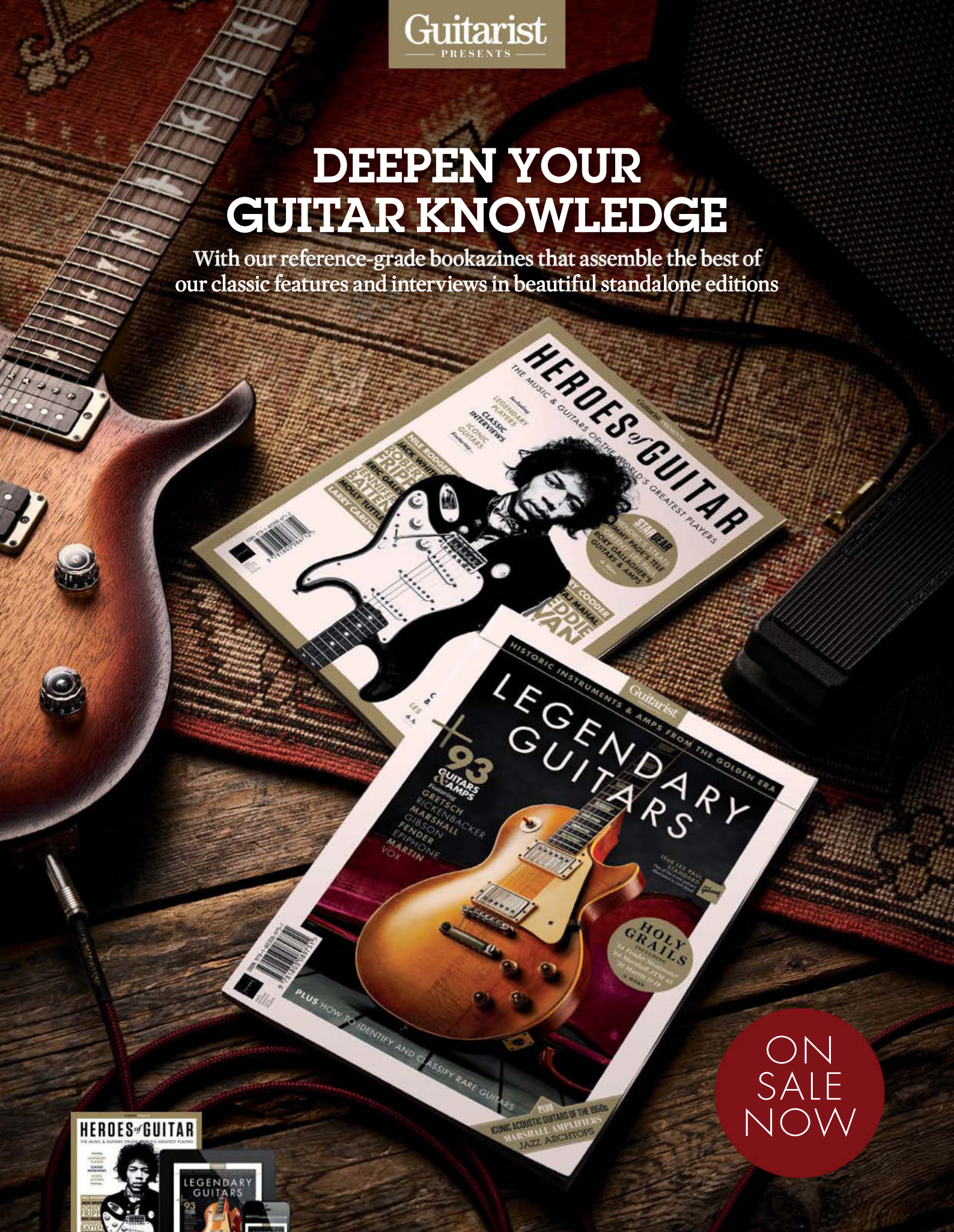

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Call In The Pros

More used to doing our own makeovers in The Mod Squad, we sit back and let the Vintage ProShop do the heavy lifting for our custom build

Words Dave Burrluck

The Vintage brand celebrated its 25th anniversary back in 2020 and today exports its wide range of inspired-by models worldwide. As the company's success proves, there are an awful lot of us that buy and play budget instruments.

This writer's V62 was purchased well over a decade ago from Cash Convertors for around £60. It was one of the early Vintage 'relics' and far from accurate or believable. But with a considerable amount of modding – including trying to reduce the relicing, stripping the neck finish and oiling and waxing it, plus a fret dress and polish, a lot of fingerboard edge rolling, a steel block Wilkinson vibrato with added titanium saddles, a bone nut, oh, and a set of Bare Knuckle '63 Veneer Board single coils and posh wiring loom – it's a guitar that's often gigged and recorded with. What we and many others have done is, in fact, the foundation of the ProShop.

The three-strong team – manager Nathan Sharp, his brother Chris, and Neil Robshaw – moonlight in the ProShop alongside their other duties at parent company John Hornby Skewes' HQ in Garforth, Leeds. "We're probably looking at making around 300 ProShop guitars a year – that's quite a lot of work for our team on top of the other things we have to do here," laughs Nathan. "But obviously it's not all one-off bespoke builds like yours. There are the limited runs we do where it's more of a simple upgrade from the stock model, something different for the customer, where we're not talking about the eight to 10 hours or more spent producing an individual build."

This all affects the final cost of the guitar, of course: the fewer work hours and the fewer parts that are upgraded, the more attractive the end price. Not that we gave that any thought at all when we were asked to order up a custom ProShop model for review that we'd based on the Vintage Reissued V72...

Go Bespoke

"On your build, instead of using the standard V72 body, stripping and refinishing it, it was actually a new body that we got made at the Vintage factory and shipped over because it was a new pickup configuration," Nathan explains. "We do similar things but not with a P-90 soapbar route. Also, unlike the standard V72, there isn't a flame maple veneer on it because we knew we were going to do the black finish for you. So we had to wait to get that body in, then it was a case of spraying it as fast as we could to meet your deadline.

"Actually, after I'd put the white primer coat on I thought it looked so good I was going to give you a call and suggest we left it like that! It was lovely, the paint was just dropping into the grain – there was virtually no finish at all."

As we write in our review, the neck and fretwork is very nicely done. "You can thank me for that," chuckles Nathan. "I kept the neck quite natural looking with the staining and the wear. The neck finish is actually an acrylic, like a sealer; it just keeps it very natural feeling, rather than going to town with a heavier lacquer."

So, if the basic chassis of our build upset the apple cart a little, our boutique-y concept hardly helped, not least the specified aluminium control plate with its three-way toggle, rather than the standard three-way lever switch.

"Neil made that for you – he whittled it out of some aluminium we had," continues Nathan. "He shaped it then I aged it, like all the parts, in-house. It's not an acid process, it's more natural. We've custom-built a rotary device that you can put various types of hardcore in, stones and things, and water, and then we time how long the parts are in process. If you leave them in there all day you end up with parts that look as battered as anything – then we leave them in longer [to soak] to achieve the rusting. The aged parts are then stripped down and re-oiled ready to go on the guitars. The Bigsbys that we do all come out different, the way the process attacks the black paint that's on there. It gets some very natural wear patterns, but, yes, there's some stripping down afterwards."

> "We're making around 300 ProShop guitars a year – but it's not all one-off bespoke builds"

Even the trendy cut-off bridge we specified caused a problem. "It is a Wilkinson bridge, but it was a full T-style bridge that we cut down, which loses the

Vintage's UK ProShop team, (left to right) Nathan Sharp, Neil Robshaw and Chris Sharp, take a break from building

This ProShop Unique build shows off a higher ageing level, but it still uses the same white undercoat/black top-coat as our custom order

1. The very cleanly machined body of our custom build had to be specially ordered from Vintage's factory in Asia
2. Once the undercoat was on, ProShop manager Nathan thought it looked cool as is. And so do we! This might be our next ProShop order...
3. The black overcoat goes on next. As ever, the guitar was fully finished before the team started the relicing process

branding on the front. Then, after ageing them, we added those brass Duplo saddles. The R Series Wilkinson pickups you requested came in clean, too, so we needed to age their covers."

By this point in our conversation, this writer is feeling rather embarrassed that we'd put the ProShop to so much trouble. But it didn't stop there. The V72 doesn't come with a tortoiseshell scratchplate, so Nathan got to work

"That started as a standard T-style plate, but because of the f-hole it had to be reshaped. Then I needed to recut the pickup hole for the neck P-90."

While many of the lower-priced ProShop builds will use the wiring looms of the standard Vintage models, our particular build specified CTS pots, a partial coil-split and an Orange Drop cap, which adds to the parts' cost, plus there's the additional time needed to wire it all up. But there were still more things to get right.

> "[On custom builds] you're putting things together like a jigsaw and asking what looks right"

"Your build went through a few changes," Nathan tells us. "It had a white pickup mounting ring for the bridge humbucker at one time. You see, you're putting things together like a jigsaw and asking yourself what looks right. So, before we'd put the scratchplate on, that white pickup surround, which matched the top edge-binding, looked great. But with the tortoiseshell it all began to look too busy. That's why we went with the black pickup surround. I wasn't sure about those witch-hat knobs, either – they look like cooker knobs – but I now think they look right on that specific guitar."

All this work, the transformation, makes it difficult to assign a country of origin, doesn't it? "Well, we do now say 'Built in the UK' as it's probably about 80 per cent of the build process that is done here. And, of course, all the guitars are designed here in the first place. Also, we are literally hitting most countries with these builds; it's not just the UK. A lot of places are very excited to get guitars that are built in the UK at a price that's right for them: China, Japan, Germany, Sweden... pretty much any country you can name," Nathan concludes. "Hopefully, people will see the one we've built for you and say, 'Yes, I like that ... but can I have it with this?'" G

Über Huber

We take advantage of the rare chance to get our hands on a Nik Huber guitar and celebrate 15 years of the stripped-down Krautster. Does guitar making get any better?

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

NIK HUBER KRAUTSTER III £3,940

CONTACT **Nik Huber Guitars** WEB **www.nikhuber-guitars.com**

What You Need To Know

1. **Is this actually a new guitar?** Well, officially, it's a new model. For the past 15 years the Krautster I and II have primarily used Nik Huber's single-cut Les Paul Junior/Special-inspired Orca shape. But in an effort to differentiate it from someone else's outline, primarily in the US market, the Krautster III now features Nik's earlier Dolphin outline.

2. **So, same guitar, different outline?** That's the deal. The Krautster has been the most-ordered Huber guitar over the years; ironic, really, as when Nik introduced the guitar back in 2009, as an antidote to his carved-top 'posh' guitars, he didn't think anyone would order one!

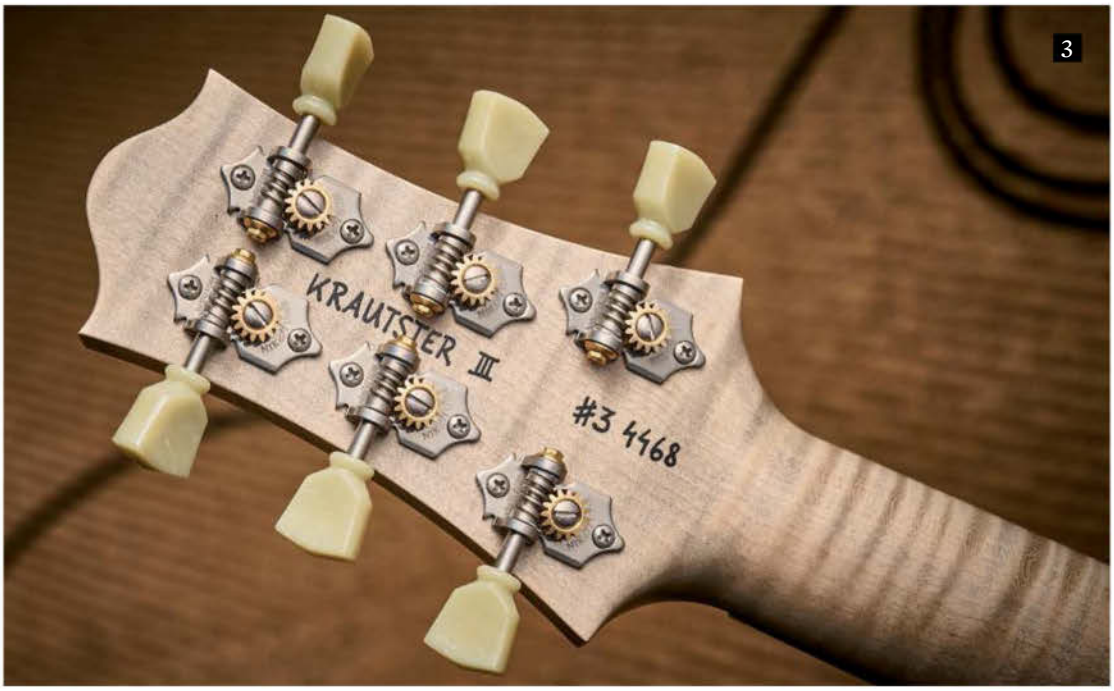
3. **Hasn't Huber done this before?** Technically, yes. You could order a Krautster with the Dolphin body as an upcharge custom order, but the standard model was always Orca-shaped.

Getting our hands on a Nik Huber guitar is a rare occurrence as everything he and his small team makes is instantly snapped up by hungry dealers. But you only have to spend a few minutes with your hands wrapped around this Krautster III to realise you're in a different league: guitar-making royalty.

The Krautster first appeared back in 2009, in single- 'I' and dual-pickup 'II' iterations, using Nik's Orca outline shape: a classic slab-bodied single-cut, typically in 'worn' satin colours and stripped-down style. It was quite a directional change as Nik had slowly established a solid reputation during the previous decade and a half for his sumptuous carved-top guitars with highly figured woods and a 'dipped in glass' finish. But the timing proved perfect and the more-affordable Krautster went on to become his most-ordered guitar.

Now, this III version swaps back to Nik's original Dolphin outline, a sort of stylised take on the Telecaster with a more rounded base and upper shoulder. While we discuss the reasons for the switch in body style elsewhere in this feature, let's remind ourselves of the craft.

1. The sounds that are available from the humbucker/P-90 complement mean any gig is ably covered



2. The Krautster's pickups, like most of the others featured on Huber guitars, are made by German maker Harry Häussel. All the plastic parts – like this cover, the scratchplate and the control knobs – are lightly aged to match the 'worn' (but not reliced) vibe

3. These Nik Huber-designed open-back tuners are made by Gotoh and reflect the elegant simplicity of the Krautster. The model and serial number are hand-written

UNDER THE HOOD What can we see inside this Krautster?

Nik Huber clearly doesn't waste machining time with oversized control cavities; there's just enough space for the simple circuit. The cavity is coated with conductive screening paint and the perfectly fitting and recessed cover is copper-foil backed. All good.

We can just about see the volume control is a 500k audio taper CTS pot with that large TAD treble bleed, a 250pF silver mica capacitor. It's wired modern style and the tone cap is sizable, too: a 660V .022µF Tube Amp Doctor (TAD) 'Orange Drop'. The tone control is the modern CTS PCB style, which simply splits the bridge humbucker, voicing the screw coil, when the switch is pulled up.

Have the Krautster's pickups changed over the past years? "We did change the bridge pickup, slightly," says Nik. "The earlier ones were slightly hotter – that was the model from Harry Häussel called 'Hot'. We changed it into the Krautster bridge pickup, which has a little less output. We're looking at 14/15kohms, still a hot pickup, but we've stayed with basically the same pickups because they're so popular."

As Häussel explains, its P90 1956 at the neck is a "replica of an old -P90 from the 50s – easy response, bluesy, nice highs, good mids and a suitable bass foundation. The Alnico V magnets are degaussed; the neck version of the P90 1956 has slightly fewer windings than a 'normal' P-90; the magnets are specially charged to create the typical 50s sound."

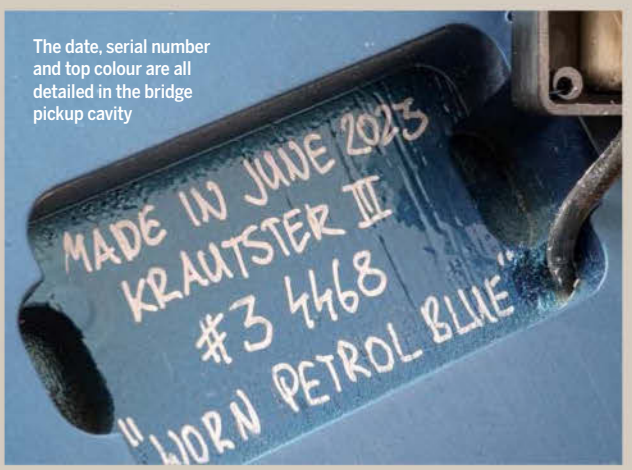
Measured at output, the bridge reading is 15.26k and 7.73k when split. The neck P-90 measures 7.07k.

Removing the neck pickup, you can clearly see the neck itself is full width and sits someway into the body under that pickup. Pulling out the bridge pickup you'll also see the hand-written model ID: just another small, carefully considered detail.

There's no extra space in the control cavity – you can just about see those TAD caps for the treble bleed and tone control

The Krautster B bridge humbucker is based on Häussel's 'Hot' humbucker with a few less winds

Like Huber's builds, Harry Häussel's pickups are beautifully detailed



The date, serial number and top colour are all detailed in the bridge pickup cavity

Simple and very classy, Nik Huber's headstock won't be confused with anyone else's

Based around a PRS-like scale length of 635mm (25-inch), the Krautster, as always intended, is a bare-bones simplistic guitar. If you want bells and whistles and a slathering of opulence, Nik will happily satisfy your dreams, but it won't be called a Krautster. The body is slab-style two-piece centre-joined mahogany, 43mm in depth, with a slight, smoothly carved ribcage contour on the back. Its top edge is cleanly cream bound, the back edges with quite a large radius.

But it's the neck that you'll notice before anything else. It's slightly diagonally grained so the heavy flame is enhanced on the bass side – the bit you look at – and typically it has a lightly grey/blue wash that goes back to the first of the breed. It also has plenty of heft, super satin-smooth to the touch and a subtly V'd yet full-feeling profile. If you bought this guitar just for this exceptional neck, we wouldn't blame you.

Unlike the bound body edge, the deeply coloured rosewood fingerboard is unbound, with simple bone dot inlays, and has Huber's standard 254mm to 356mm (10- to 14-inch) compound radius. The fret tangs are notched and sit in milled slots that stop before the edges, so you can't see any fret slots from the sides. The wire is pretty classic medium jumbo, certainly not overbig, superbly installed and polished, while the fingerboard edges are lightly rolled like they should be.

It's the neck that you'll notice before anything else with its subtly V'd yet full-feeling profile

If features like the neck and fretwork create a far-from-new feel, not to mention the 'worn' brushed top finish, that is enhanced by the lightly-aged Huber wrapover bridge with its PRS-style intonated ridge and the bridge pickup's cover. The open-back Huber (by Gotoh) tuners don't look aged, just very classy in a nickel plating with the brass cog-wheel proudly on show. Even the simple three-ply scratchplate has the 'new' gloss burnished back to a light satin, as do the cover of the direct-mounted P-90 and even the control knobs. This class continues to the black ebony-faced headstock with what looks like

THE RIVALS

Despite the different body outline change, there's still a very Junior/Special vibe about the slab-topped Krautster. From Gibson's Murphy Lab collection there's the 1957 Les Paul Junior and Special (£4,199 and £4,399), both in TV Yellow and lightly aged.

Over here in the UK, Patrick James Eggle has his hugely respected Macon range. It starts with the double-cut, slab-body, single-pickup Macon Junior (from £3,700). The Macon Vintage swaps to a single-cut slab body with bridge humbucker and neck P-90 (from £3,700). Each model has a wide options list.

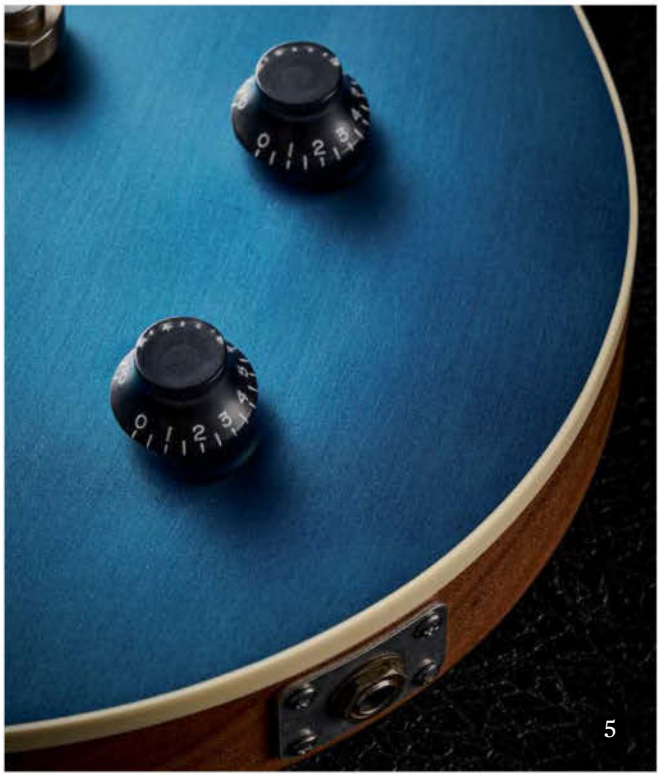
On a budget? Another UK build to check out is the PJD Carey Standard (£1,299), which (although it has a longer scale and is a proper bolt on) shows plenty of Krautster influence, not least the humbucker/P-90 pickup complement. These new Standards use a lightweight obeche body with maple-only fingerboards, although alder bodies and rosewood bodies are now being offered (£POA).

Everything works so well: no surprises, no disappointments and nothing gets in the way of the playing

4

4. This lightweight aluminium wrapover, with its preset intonation ridge, was clearly inspired by PRS's Stoptail bridge. Nik also offers a fully adjustable version

5. "As you know, I'm a big Junior fan," says Nik Huber, "and I like to vary things a lot with the volume control. When I turn it down to clean up the sound I don't want to lose the high-end. Some people say, 'Well, that's not like a Les Paul,' but I'm not looking at a Les Paul at all. So I just ended up with this one capacitor on the volume that I just like"



5

a lightly aged thin silver logo applied over the light satin finish. Aside from the hand-written model name and serial number on the headstock back, outwardly that's all the identification you get.

Feel & Sounds

At 3.02kg (6.64lb) this Krautster is slightly lighter than our 50s Junior reference, and strapped on it pretty much disappears. It could easily be your sofa noodler, and a few strums reveal more than enough unplugged volume for that purpose and just how vibrant and 'alive' it is. And although it is a big neck (by the way, Nik does offer a slimmer '60s-style option), it is just so well shaped, it's virtually addictive.

For those who care about such things, the neck's depth measures 23mm at the 1st fret and 25.2mm by the 12th with a not over-wide nut width of 42.7mm, and 51.8mm at the 12th, just slightly deeper and slightly thinner than our 50s Junior. Strung with 10s and with the 635mm scale and a pretty mainstream action height of 1.5mm on the treble side and 1.8mm on the bass side, it plays effortlessly with nice height

We have the unique heel-shaping that looks uncomfortable but really isn't. The back finish is a very light open-pore clear nitro, while the neck, which uses the same finish, is grey-stained, cut back to enhance the figure, then stained again with a light grey wash

to the perfectly polished frets (which aren't over-wide, either).

The exceptional feel and playability of the Krautster is matched by its sounds. Anyone having to cross genres and styles within a single gig will appreciate the subtlety here, and the key to that lies in a very well-considered control circuit (see Under The Hood on page 98). With both controls full up, there's beefy clout at the bridge for all your classic rock needs, while the neck P-90 sits just right with a very musical balance of PAF-y plum with a subtle bite. The mix hollows the voice, not least with a little volume reduction, as we edge into a more Fender-y territory.

Pull up the tone pot switch on the bridge to engage the coil-split, which cleans up a little more, enhancing the bite: there's Tele-like character without any excessive edge. The volume control alone has a near-perfect taper and doesn't pull down the highs as you roll it back; that tone pulls the highs back but even full-off is usable for a flutey 'woman' tone voice with a little outboard gain boost. It's not bringing anything new to the table, but everything works *so* well: no surprises, no disappointments and nothing gets in the way of the playing.

Verdict

As Nik Huber is a well-known fan of 50s Juniors and Specials, you could suggest the Krautster is pretty much his signature guitar. It's not just the immaculate craft on show; it's a real-world player's guitar and would be a crime to keep cosseted in a case or gigbag. This craft and experience doesn't come cheap, and we're not short of high-level boutique options, either – many, of course, inspired by Nik's style. But don't blame us if, after getting your hands on one of these, you're considering what you can sell or trade to make it your own...

There's a beautiful worn-in feel and appearance here, too, and, be warned, the very thin finish wears and marks easily, although like all Huber models there's plenty of scope for customisation, too, in terms of neck shape and custom colours, and we're sure Nik would spray you a full-gloss version. For us, though, the finishing is so much part of the appeal: classy, non-precious and impossible to fault.

NIK HUBER KRAUTSTER III

PRICE: £3,940 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Germany
TYPE: Single-cutaway, Dolphin-shape solidbody electric
BODY: 1-piece mahogany with cream binding
NECK: 1-piece flamed maple, 'Standard Krautster' profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.7mm
FINGERBOARD: East Indian rosewood, bone dots, 254-356mm (10-14") compound radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Huber aluminium Stoptail bridge (aged), Huber (by Gotoh) 510 open-backed tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: Nik Huber Krautster humbucker (by Häussel) at bridge; Häussel P90 '1956' single coil at neck, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone (with pull/push coil-split)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.02/6.64
OPTIONS: The base price of the Krautster III is £3,595; the custom colour adds £345. Other options include Bigsby vibrato (£POA). Custom orders on request
RANGE OPTIONS: The Orca-shaped Krautster II is still available from £3,795 (inc case). Other 'slab'-bodied Hubers with the Dolphin outline include the Piet (from £3,395 with hardtail bridge; £3,995 with offset vibrato) and the Surfmeister (from £4,895)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes (£POA)
FINISHES: Worn Petrol Blue (as reviewed). Standard colours are Onyx Black, Cali Gold, Worn Copper and Vintage White. Custom colours on request – brushed polyurethane top finish, thin nitro to back, sides and neck

Guitarist GOLD

10/10

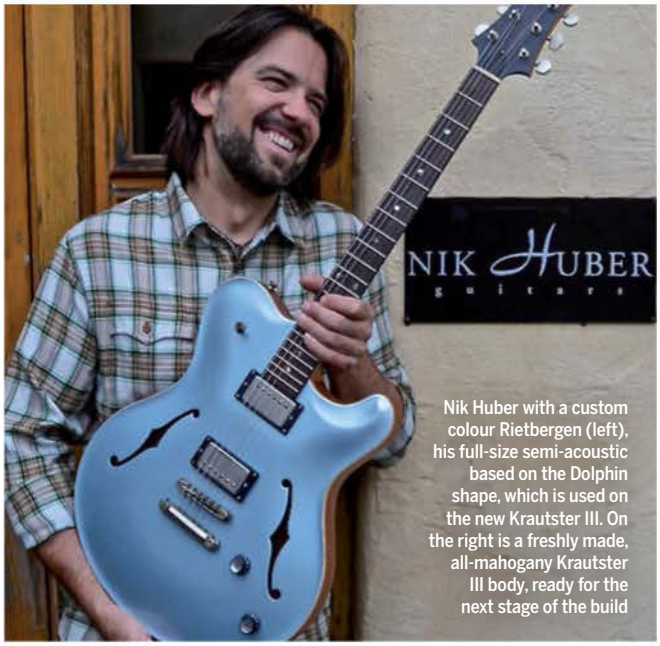
PROS Superbly crafted, lightweight solidbody with a beautifully shaped 'big' neck; expansive sounds and very well-dialled in control circuit; lived-in feel and appearance

CONS Nothing to see here!

Krautster Craft

There's always the risk that someone might object to a maker's designs. In the case of Nik Huber's Krautster, it came 15 years after the guitar was introduced...

Words Dave Burrluck



Nik Huber with a custom colour Rietbergen (left), his full-size semi-acoustic based on the Dolphin shape, which is used on the new Krautster III. On the right is a freshly made, all-mahogany Krautster III body, ready for the next stage of the build

The dilemma for any guitar maker – large or small, new or old – is whether they, ahem, borrow someone else's design or plough a new furrow. Many brands do both, of course. We're not talking about creating a counterfeit, but the classic shapes from the 50s and 60s have always held an allure that is increasingly hard to shake. Combine one of those classic outlines with a new headstock and a different pickup set and off you go. But get too close to the flame and many makers have run into trouble with Fender or Gibson obviously taking issue. For a small maker, receiving a cease and desist letter from a huge heritage company is enough to make them subtly – or profoundly – change their design, even if they're actually working within the law.

Despite introducing his admittedly Les Paul-like Orca outline back in the 90s, Nik Huber has never had any issues; after all, he's hardly the only maker using that outline to create a new model. "Last year I heard that Rock N Roll Relics were having trouble with Gibson," Nik tells us, "and then Jericho Guitars, who I believe had their website shut down by Gibson's lawyers. I then got a very friendly letter from Gibson saying that they're aware of us and they like the quality of the guitars we build, but there is a trademark in the USA and they asked if I would be open to respect that, or if I could change the outline of the [Orca-shaped] guitars. I called Paul Reed Smith [who had mentored Nik in his early guitar-building days] and his lawyers; I called John Suhr's lawyer as he had some issues when he came up with his Aura design.

> "Earlier in 2023, I'd already decided to focus more on my Dolphin shape... It was my first shape"

"But, on reflection, I simply thought, 'Do I want to take a risk?' The USA market is about 20 to 25 per cent of our business, so it's not a really big deal. I'm sorry for all our US dealers who did well with the Orca and Krautster shapes, but I thought I'd respect Gibson's request. I'm not in fight mode or [interested in] taking the energy and time to find out if I could still [legally] do it. I thought, 'No, I'm not going there.'

"In fact, earlier in 2023, I'd already decided to focus more on my Dolphin shape, which is what you reviewed first back in the 90s," says Nik, reminding us of this writer's initial encounter with his fledgling craft. "That was my first shape before I even came up with the [more Les Paul-like] Orca outline in '96... although you can see it's a mix of everybody," he laughs. To that end, he successfully launched the Dolphin '59 and the Dolphin Special in 2023.

"To be totally honest, the Orca '59 was just too close to a Les Paul," reflects Nik. "The Les Paul is not yet a generic shape, but if I'm in the audience at a concert I have no idea if the guitarist is playing a Huber Orca '59 or a Gibson Les Paul."

It's a delicate balance, of course, because established brands are reliant on their orders, particularly custom makers.

"The last few years have only been reactive from the orders we get," Nik says. "I wasn't really steering my ship; it was being steered by my customers. There have been a lot of orders and that creates its own pressure. But it means creating a new guitar I might want to see is more difficult – the Krautster was one, the Piet another. Bernie Marsden's guitar was, of course, something

Before the Krautster came along in 2009, Nik Huber introduced the Junior in 2006. We looked at this stunning all-korina Dolphin-shaped Junior back in 2007. Nik still makes a few of these a year

1. Huber owners will recognise the distinctive carving of the neck and body heel of that Junior. Unlike the later Krautster, the neck here is korina, not flamed maple

2. Nik and a brand-new Krautster III. "Most of the [Krautster III] guitar you have there has been done by my team," says Nik. "I only final checked this particular guitar"

he came up with and he obviously needed a single-cut Orca shape. But I can't deny, speaking to you now, that at some point I might come up with a *new* single-cut shape that is unique enough not to upset anybody."

We're talking in early January, a couple of weeks before the Winter NAMM Show 2024 and Nik's orders are "already considerable", he says. "We're busy! But times are getting more difficult, I think. I see it with some of my dealers that the guitars are not selling as quickly as they did; that's definitely recognisable. But still I have full order books. I think we currently have around 200 orders in for Krautster IIs, so I think we can survive not doing those, and Orcas, for the USA market. To be honest, though, I was close to shutting the Krautster II down completely."

We're rather glad he didn't as in its Dolphin-outlined III designation it's not only a more original design but somehow is just more Nik Huber. Quite a few customers have thought the same over the past 15 years, too: "We actually have this guitar – a Krautster II but with the Dolphin shape – on custom order quite regularly for people that love the Krautster concept but prefer the earlier shape." And you could suggest

> "At some point I might come up with a new single-cut unique enough not to upset anybody"

the new Krautster III actually goes back to the Dolphin-shaped single-pickup Huber Junior that appeared briefly from 2006. "Yes, we've done quite a few of those, too," Nik agrees, "although we don't put it on our website. We don't want to confuse people, but we still build a few each year."

Ironically, the original Krautster, in shape and its stripped-down style, has been a recipe that's inspired plenty of other makers over the past decade and a half.

"And other things as well," says Nik, "but I started this whole thing back in the 90s so today I have a brand – something people know and have known for decades. While I don't want to compare myself to brands like Ferrari or Rolex, these are companies who have always done what they did: the most expensive [or their kinds], but they have a brand that seems very heavy in influencing people in their buying decisions. There is resale value to consider as well, of course. I don't want to sound arrogant, but despite the current times I'm still getting new dealer enquiries from the USA, and we do very well in Asia, too, even though, of course, people can definitely buy a nice guitar for less money."

When we last spoke to Nik, some three years back, he had eight staff working on the guitars at his Rodgau workshop in Germany, with an output of around 300 instruments a year. "We're looking at 400 guitars a year now and that means I have more people working for me. I now have 12 people building guitars, but if we were all to go for a Christmas dinner there'd be 18 of us as some of the team are part-time, like my son who does a little bit of social media work, packaging, CITES documentation and all the other paperwork, and my bookkeeper who will do a few hours every week."

This slow progression and the utmost attention to quality and detail are surely key factors to the ongoing demand and success of Nik Huber and his expanding team. In 2026, the company will be celebrating its 30th anniversary – not bad for, as his biog states, "a failed rockstar turned woodworker"!

Reet Petite

Electro-Harmonix attempts to squeeze into the gaps on your pedalboard with its extra-small Pico range

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

With the exception of the Triboro Bridge, EHX has endowed each pedal with footswitches that are not just latching. Some have momentary functionality and some have press-and-hold functions

ELECTRO-HARMONIX PICO PEDALS FROM £129

CONTACT **Electro-Harmonix** WEB **www.ehx.com**

What You Need To Know

1. **Didn't we just see these a few issues back?**
No, those were the Nano pedals, which are basically smaller, more pedalboard-friendly versions of larger Electro-Harmonix pedals. These Pico pedals are the same sort of thing, only smaller still!

2. **What's the point? Do we really need pedals this small?**
It's convenience, really. It's so easy to run out of pedalboard space, but having pedals this size means that you can either have a smaller, easily transported 'board or have more scope for slipping pedals into slots on a larger 'board.

3. **There's loads of the blighters...**
Yes! EHX actually released nine new pedals simultaneously – the company's biggest release ever. Besides the eight that are featured in this review, there is also the Platform compressor/limiter.

Electro-Harmonix calls this range its 'Pico' series, but when used by several other companies this familiar format is sometimes called 'micro' or 'mini' pedals. Nevertheless, the basic form remains the same: you get a very small pedal, around 1.5 inches in width and 3.5 inches long. They are powered by a nine-volt adaptor as there's no room for a battery, with input sockets on the sides, offset from each other because you wouldn't get the jack plugs in if they were opposite each other. All of these EHX pedals seem really solidly built and follow the same control layout of four knobs and a small button that can toggle between up to three different modes.

Dirty Drive

A drive pedal is the foundation of any pedalboard and the multi-mode Triboro Bridge dishes the dirt in three flavours – Overdrive, Distortion and Fuzz – toggled through with the Type switch. Alongside Volume and Gain knobs you get potent Bass and Treble adjustment, apart from in the Big Muff-like Fuzz mode where they adjust a noise gate and a low-pass filter. If you want a more modern bass-light and mids-heavy sound, you can add a Contour EQ to the input by pressing and holding the Type button. A choice of very usable voices makes this a most compact and cost-effective way to expand your 'board's dirt options.

Envelope Effectors

The Deep Freeze Sound Retainer is all about the ability to freeze a moment in sound. It gives you the ability to freeze a note or chord for sustained effect or to use as a bed to play over. This can all be executed by physically using the footswitch, latching or momentary, or by an automatic mode. You can use it for a single sound or to build up layers of sound, and there are ways to manipulate the envelope and morph frozen notes or chords into the next. It's quirky but has great performance potential.

The Attack Decay pedal, released in 2019, was a modern revamp of a long-gone 70s-era pedal. This one puts it into a smaller space but loses some of the functionality. Two modes, Mono and Poly, determine the volume envelope for your note or chord, delivering smooth volume swells, psychedelic tape reverse stylings and harsh staccato effects. The Blend control is essential, particularly in dialling up our favourite effect of just wet sound and no dry, and here it's hidden (button push and Sens knob), so unless you really are short of

1. This Shift knob on the Pitch Fork is actually divided into 10 segments, each recalling a different interval. There are no markings so you have to use your ears and also note that the LED blinks each time you move from one segment into the next. Meanwhile, if you want to move up or down to your shifted pitch like a Whammy when you engage the pedal, the Sweep control adjusts the pitch sweep speed from an instant to four seconds

2. While the larger version of this Attack Decay pedal has a dedicated Blend knob for dry/wet mix, here you have to hold down the mode switch to turn the Sensitivity knob to adjust the blend

3. The Canyon Echo's Filter control offers a range of tonal adjustment for the repeats. Turned anticlockwise it adjusts a low-pass filter, dulling them down. Turned clockwise it operates a high-pass filter for a thinner, brighter sound

THE RIVALS

If these are just too small for you, the obvious solution is to look at the larger versions from EHX. But if it is the tiny size that floats your boat, then there are other diminutive options around. Rather than list rivals for individual pedals, let's look at a few companies that offer the Pico-style option. First up is Mooer Audio who does a huge range of what it terms 'micro' pedals. TC Electronic also has its 'Mini' pedals with small versions of the Hall Of Fame reverb, Flashback delay and Polytune among others. MXR also does smaller pedals such as its Duke Of Tone.

space, buy the bigger one – it's around the same price and has also got onboard fuzz and presets.

Pitch Performers

The POG Polyphonic Octave Generator creates high- and low-octave signals to mix with the dry: simply use the three knobs to set your blend and use the Tone knob to tweak the sound. It's linked to three selectable modes – a low-pass filter or a high-pass filter for the octaves, or a tilt-EQ for all three voices – which all together give you plenty of scope for sculpting the sound. Mix in upper octave for a faux-12-string jangle, leave out the dry and just put lower octave in to play bass parts, or mix it up and add a little extra to your core tone. If you like what a POG does, this offers a great way to add one to your rig.

The Pitch Fork, meanwhile, can also do octave effects besides a wide range of other intervals. It's a polyphonic pitch shifter/harmony pedal with a transposition range of up to +/-3 octaves. You can use the Mode button to select pitch up, down or both simultaneously – the actual pitch being selected from one of 10 positions of the Shift knob. The footswitch can operate in normal latching mode, but you can set it to operate in momentary mode to bring the effect in for as long as you hold it down. Pitch change can be instantaneous or the Sweep knob can bring in a bend to pitch of up to four seconds. Like the POG, it all tracks cleanly and can give you solid prominent harmonies or a sprinkling of fairy dust.

Space Explorers

And so we come to a trio of effects in the delay/reverb category, all solid performers. The larger Canyon Delay provides 11 delay options, but this Pico version is a straight digital delay with tap tempo linked to three selectable tap divisions. With delay times running from eight milliseconds to three seconds there's plenty you can do with this pedal and you can tailor the repeats to the exact sound you need. A Filter knob turned anticlockwise dulls down the repeats to be more reminiscent of an analogue delay, while turned clockwise it gives you leaner sounding repeats.

If you're looking for more specifically retro sounds, the Rerun is also derived from the original Canyon, offering its Tape Delay algorithm in a dedicated pedal with some cool performance features such as tap tempo and runaway self-oscillation via footswitch hold. A Saturation knob that adds distortion, plus three levels of Flutter recreating pitch modulation, lets you get those repeats sounding just right.

While the Oceans 11 Reverb had a selection of traditional and esoteric reverbs onboard, the Oceans 3-Verb gives you the basics – Spring, Plate and Hall reverbs. The Delay/Spring knob sets pre-delay for the Plate and Hall modes but offers three different spring lengths for the spring reverb. The Reverb Time knob offers infinite reverb in Plate or Hall modes when set to max, but you can also bring this in with a press-and-hold of the footswitch.

Verdict

There's no doubt that the convenience factor is extremely high here – if you want a functional pedal to fit in a tight space, each has something to offer. The Triboro delivers great utilitarian value and the two delays and the reverb will do a meat 'n' potatoes job in the tightest of spaces. The envelope pedals are more niche and could be the curveball your 'board needs, while the pitch pedals, though the most expensive, are standouts for putting so much colour and creativity in a tiny enclosure.

EHX PICO DEEP FREEZE

PRICE: £189
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Sound retainer/ sustainer pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass, Latch, Moment and Auto modes, tap tempo, selectable bypass topologies
CONTROLS: Dry, Effect, Speed/ Layer, Gliss, Mode switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 100mA current draw
DIMENSIONS: 50 (w) x 92 (d) x 47mm (h)

8/10

EHX PICO ATTACK DECAY

PRICE: £129
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Tape reverse simulator pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass, Attack time 0ms to 8s, Decay time 4ms to 8s, Hidden Blend control adjusts from 100% wet signal to 100% dry signal
CONTROLS: Vol, Sens, Attack, Decay, Poly switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 100mA current draw
DIMENSIONS: 50 (w) x 92 (d) x 47mm (h)

8/10

EHX PICO PITCH FORK

PRICE: £199
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Pitch shifter pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass, Latching and Momentary footswitch modes, 30 fully polyphonic pitch-shifting options, selectable bypass topologies
CONTROLS: Vol, Blend, Sweep, Shift, Mode switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 100mA current draw
DIMENSIONS: 50 (w) x 92 (d) x 47mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

EHX PICO POG

PRICE: £219
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Polyphonic Octave Generator pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass
CONTROLS: Sub Octave, Octave Up, Dry, Tone, Filter switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 100mA current draw
DIMENSIONS: 50 (w) x 92 (d) x 47mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

EHX PICO TRIBORO BRIDGE

PRICE: £129
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Drive pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass, Overdrive, Distortion and Fuzz modes, Input Contouring EQ
CONTROLS: Vol, Gain, Bass/Gate, Treble/Tone, Type switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 100mA current draw
DIMENSIONS: 50 (w) x 92 (d) x 47mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

EHX PICO CANYON ECHO

PRICE: £139
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Delay pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass, 8ms to 3s delay time, tap tempo, selectable Tails bypass, Infinite Repeats feature
CONTROLS: Blend, Delay, Filter, Feedback, Tap Div switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 100mA current draw
DIMENSIONS: 50 (w) x 92 (d) x 47mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

EHX PICO RERUN

PRICE: £129
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Tape delay pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass, 8ms to 3s delay time, tap tempo, selectable Tails bypass
CONTROLS: Blend, Delay, Sat, Feedback, Flutter switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 100mA current draw
DIMENSIONS: 50 (w) x 92 (d) x 47mm (h)

8/10

EHX PICO OCEANS 3-VERB

PRICE: £139
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Reverb pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass, Spring, Plate and Hall reverbs, selectable Tails bypass, Infinite Reverb function
CONTROLS: Blend, Time, Delay/Spring, Tone, Type switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 100mA current draw
DIMENSIONS: 50 (w) x 92 (d) x 47mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Extremely compact size; solid build; reasonable prices; viable substitutes for the larger versions in most cases

CONS Small knobs, if we are being picky – but they are necessary!

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BLUEPRINT

FOR THE ROSES

Ivison Guitars has only been in business for six years, but its Dakota model has already headlined Glastonbury with Guns N' Roses star Richard Fortus. We meet founder Neil Ivison to find out how he's making new electrics that evoke the raw spirit of retro tone

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

In recent years, we've seen more than a few canny luthiers – such as Dennis Fano and Patrick James Eggle – blend together elements from classic vintage guitars to create modern electrics that are built to an exacting contemporary spec yet sound and feel as if they were made in the 50s. Now, another name can be added to the wishlist of anyone who enjoys the blend of usability and vibe such guitars offer: Ivison Guitars.

Based in Worcestershire, Neil Ivison is its proud founder – but he says it's almost by accident that he fell into making his high-end, vintage-style electrics. He must be doing something very right, however, because bands such as The Hives and Guns N' Roses have started using his guitars. The Dakota model in particular seems to be a favourite, with its blend of Les Paul Junior and Firebird styling cues and just a touch of Telecaster spank and snap – plus versatile range of tonewood and electronics options.

We join Neil to talk about the somewhat charmed life of his guitar-making enterprise, and learn why it's been driven by player satisfaction and word of mouth all the way to the main stage of Glastonbury...

Neil Ivison in his West Midlands workshop

How did you get into guitar making?

"Well, I've been playing since I was 12, and then I was in various bands and what have you. I ended up as a touring guitar tech for about 15 years – went all over the world with various bands. My son was born in 2012 and I decided that [touring] is a young man's game; I was away from home so much I was missing my son grow up. So I came off the road about a year later. I did various things and thought, 'Well, I'd like to try and keep my hand in with guitars of some description.'

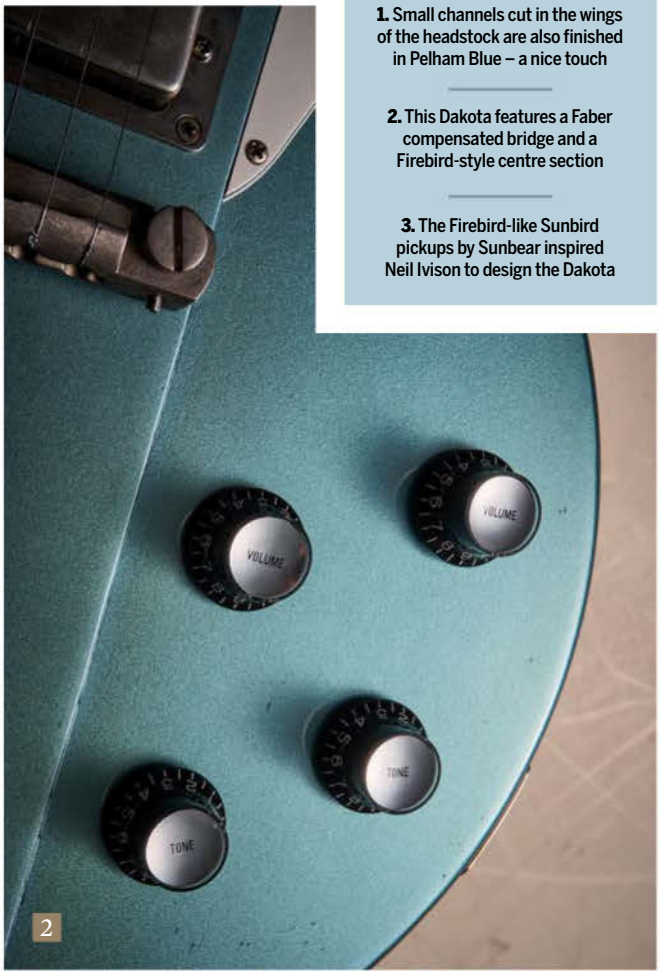
"I was still playing live myself, but I thought I'd set up a little guitar repair business and see how that went. So I started doing that, just in the garage at home, and it was going well. Then somebody asked, 'Have you ever built anything of your own?' And I thought 'Well, no, I haven't.'

"At the time, I had a nice '59 double-cut Les Paul Junior, all-original with no neck break, that I'd saved up for. I'd bought this thing when I was in America and it was beautiful. But it wasn't a joy to own because I was also bloody scared of leaving it in the house if we were away. Or when [my son] Sam was a toddler, if it was on a stand I'd say, 'Oh no, stay away from the guitar!' in case he'd knock it off the stand and break the headstock! [laughs] And again, playing live it was like, 'Ah Christ, I don't want to leave this in the pub in case it gets pinched.'

"So I thought I'd have a go at replicating that guitar as closely as I could. I went down a rabbit hole with that and made a double-cut Junior-style electric. Essentially, it was a replica with my own headstock on, at that point anyway, and it came out really well. I was like, 'Oh bloody hell, this is alright.' I lent it to a couple of mates and they asked if I could make them one.

Double vision: an Ivison Dakota in Aged Pelham Blue with mahogany body and Sunbear 'Sunbird' pickups stands next to a Korina counterpart sporting a pair of Sunbear SB-PAF humbuckers

"I thought I'd set up a little guitar repair business in the garage at home and see how that went…"



1. Small channels cut in the wings of the headstock are also finished in Pelham Blue – a nice touch

2. This Dakota features a Faber compensated bridge and a Firebird-style centre section

3. The Firebird-like Sunbird pickups by Sunbear inspired Neil Ivison to design the Dakota

Then someone else asked, too, and within six months it spiralled into this little business. I started making these vintage-correct copies of Juniors and that's where I honed my craft, I suppose. People were really bowled over by the fact the guitars felt vintage and I'd gone to as much effort as I could to make them sound old as well.

"So I did that for a couple of years, and it got to the point where we had to knock down the garage and build a workshop in its place because it had gone so well. It had turned into a job – I was only hoping it was going to be something I could waste a lot of time doing [laughs]! It was like so many things in life – it sort of comes and gets you. But it was great and I adored it."

How did you move from near-replicas of Les Paul Juniors to original designs?

"Eventually, I thought, 'Well, it's time I had a go at building my own thing.' So I came up with a guitar called the Hurricane, which had a slab body, like a Junior, with a thin maple top carve, PAF in the bridge and a P-90 in the neck. I'd repaired [session guitarist and journalist] Ed Oleszko's '56 Special with a PAF in the bridge and the old P-90 in the neck – and it was a great-sounding combination. It had just two controls – volume and tone like the old Junior – so it was basically a mash-up of a Junior, Special and 'Burst. That was the whole idea. I came up with my own body shape and it got good reviews. I also found as soon as you start building your own stuff – with your own input and your own design – it's far more rewarding. I'm full-time now and in my sixth year of doing so, so everything's happened really quickly."

The Hurricane is a great guitar, but it's the slightly more workmanlike Dakota that's ended up being used by the most high-profile players among your customers. How did the design take shape?

"Well, Stu Robson of Sunbear Pickups is involved in this story because we've been working together for [some time]. Basically, he came to me at a guitar show when I was still doing the Juniors and said, 'I'm just starting out making pickups – would you be interested?' We had a chat and immediately I knew; you could tell he was into it. Everything from the magnets to the nickel content of the screws... Straight away I thought, 'This is my guy.'

"At the time I think I was using Mojo pickups, but as I was new and just starting out [I said], 'I sort of need a 'name' [pickup maker] for a bit of brand confidence, then at least there's a name people have already heard of attached to it [as a pickup supplier]. So Stu offered to wind me a set: 'If you don't like them, you'll never hear from me again,' he said. So he wound me a set, and from pretty much then on we've worked together and grown together, really, which is nice.

"Going back to the design of the Dakota, Stu said to me one day, 'Have you ever tried Firebird pickups?' I hadn't, but I wanted to build something with them. He was just starting his Sunbird range [of Firebird-inspired pickups]. I happened to be down at [vintage retailer] ATB Guitars in Cheltenham because I do all their repairs – I have done for quite some while, six or seven years – and they had a Cardinal Red Firebird in, a beautiful-looking thing. I picked it up and tried it and thought it was great. I was sitting there playing it, and it

> "Stu Robson of Sunbear said, 'I'm just starting out making pickups – would you be interested?'"

3

"As soon as you start building stuff with your own input and own design, it's far more rewarding"

4. This korina-bodied version of the Dakota features a korina neck and Indian rosewood fretboard

5. The easy access cutaway is Ivison's own subtly distinctive take on the classic single-cut silhouette

6. The patinated Faber tuners look great on the reverse of the headstock with its distinctive 'stinger'

7. Richard Fortus on stage with Guns N' Roses at Glastonbury, playing his single-pickup Ivison

slowly started slipping down off my lap! I kept bringing the neck up, and well... you've played a Firebird, you know exactly what they're like. They've got this neck-heavy thing with those banjo tuners and there's just nothing you can do about it. They look cool as – but, to me, nothing about them is ergonomic or [built] with a player in mind, because it was a car designer who designed it. I just thought, 'There must be a way I can make this more ergonomic but still keep the sound...'

"So I came back home – it was literally that evening that I got a bit of paper and thought, 'That would work if I raised up the centre...' I wanted to keep a bit of the old Junior and Special flavour to it as well, so I kept the long-tenon joint as opposed to the through-neck and obviously raised the centre to get the Firebird look.

"I asked Stu to send me a set of these pickups – and it was a bit of a revelation. As you know, they do that 'fat Tele' thing that everybody likes and the bridge pickup can be really spiky and get 'country'. But the neck pickup on a Firebird, and on the Dakota with Stu's unit, is one of the best I've ever heard. They're a little bit Strat-y and they just sound really good. I sent it to a few people and thought it looked great. I thought, 'Well, surely somebody has done this before.' You know, somebody's [surely] put the Firebird into the single-cut shape. But even now, I'm still waiting for someone to say, 'Oi! That's my design!' But I think it's actually mine. So I'm quite chuffed about it."

The crowning moment for the Dakota, so far, must be when it ended up taking centre stage in the BBC's coverage of Guns N' Roses headlining Glastonbury in 2023. How did Richard Fortus come to play one?

"It's quite a funny story, actually. It was one Sunday afternoon and we did a roast and I was asleep on the sofa – as you do after Sunday dinners – and the phone went off. It was Richard Fortus and he said, 'Hey, man, I really love your guitars. I've been following you for 18 months and would love to try one sometime.' So I said, as I do for any [overseas] musicians who ask, 'Whenever ,you're playing in the UK, I'll bring one out to you.' I've done that with Electric Six and with The Hives – they both play my guitars. He said, 'Oh, great – actually we're over in June.' I said, 'Oh, cool. Where are you playing?' He said, 'Oh, we're headlining Glastonbury and headlining Hyde Park.' I was like, 'What the...? It is *that* Richard Fortus, who's had Guns N' Roses in his biog for the last 22 years!'

> "Richard Fortus messaged me and said, 'I've shown Slash your guitar and he likes it too...'"

"Richard's such a nice guy and he's completely gear-addicted. He's had every sort of vintage guitar you can think of and he's right into it – the winds of the pickups, all the different woods. He said to me, 'Have you ever done a Korina with Firebird pickups?' And I said, 'Well, I've not, but leave it with me.' We arranged to meet in Bath on the Friday night and they were playing on the Saturday. I took it down and he said, 'Oh, we'll meet in Vintage 'n' Rare.' [Paul] Tucker had stayed open for us, so we could try it and he opened the case and said, 'Oh, man, I've lusted after one of these for 18 months.' He played it for ages and we'd gone back and forward a bit on the spec of the pickup and the pots, but we'd got that sorted.

"I [was concerned that Glastonbury] was a televised gig and the pressure was going

to be on, but he was like, 'Yeah, I know, I appreciate that. But I want it.' He took me for dinner and we just chatted about his family and stuff, and the guitars he's had – and he was a *really* nice guy and a great player, too.

"I came back up the motorway and thought, 'That was a bit surreal.' Then he messaged me after dinner and said, 'I've been playing this in the hotel room, I'm definitely going to play it tomorrow. I've shown Slash and he likes it, too...' I decided not to tell anyone about it because I know my luck and I thought, 'Well, at the last minute he may decide not to use it.' So my wife, Rachel, and I sat in front of the telly to look out for it. Second song in, I couldn't have planned it better if I'd said to the BBC, 'What I want you to do is a nice zooming in shot from the back of the crowd up to the Pyramid Stage...' because that's what happened and there he was, playing it.

"After that, the phones went and didn't stop till the Sunday night. It was really great; people were saying, 'He's playing your guitar, I knew it from the pickguard...' or 'I knew from the shape...' Straight away, that confirmed that I'd got it right – it was distinctive enough to be an Ivison." G

www.ivisonguitars.com

PHOTO BY SAMIR HUSSEIN/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

PABLO VAN DE POEL

Dewolff's guitarist recalls a Les Paul that broke his heart and a spectacular deal on a vintage bass

When buying guitars, Pablo recommends simply going with your gut instinct. After all, he says, "I can always sell it and buy something else"

What was the first serious guitar that you bought with your own money?

"When I was eight years old, I started saving up for my first guitar, and then on my ninth birthday my grandma paid the extra 50 euros that I needed to buy a Squier Affinity Series Telecaster. I think it was, like, 400 euros. I was heavily into Metallica and that was the reason why I wanted to play guitar as a nine year old. I had my first guitar lessons and my guitar teacher put some sheet music in front of me and said, 'Okay, this is the first song you're going to learn,' and I was like, 'This is not what I expected...' I just wanted to play Metallica and shred! Then, when I was 13, I discovered Nirvana and then I got into Hendrix and that's when I got really serious about playing guitar."

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"I bought a 1956 Gibson ES-225 – single-cutaway, sunburst, two dog-ear P-90s – and it's a great guitar. Nothing sounds like a full hollowbody, those are my favourite-sounding guitars, but they're just really hard to use live when you're using distortion. Gibson, here in the Netherlands, lent me a new 225 and I felt that it had a lot of potential because you have endless sustain if you're lucky and you're in the right position. I figured, 'Well, if I find a guitar like this one but old, with old wood and old pickups, I think that's my ultimate guitar.' Then I was in Paris when we were supporting The Black Crowes on tour and I walked past a guitar shop and it was in the window, but it was just far away enough that I couldn't really tell if it was old or new. I had to wait until past lunchtime because all the shops were closed. Then I came back and walked into the shop and it turned out to be an almost 70-year-old instrument. One pickup was broken, but it was a good price so I bought it there and then."

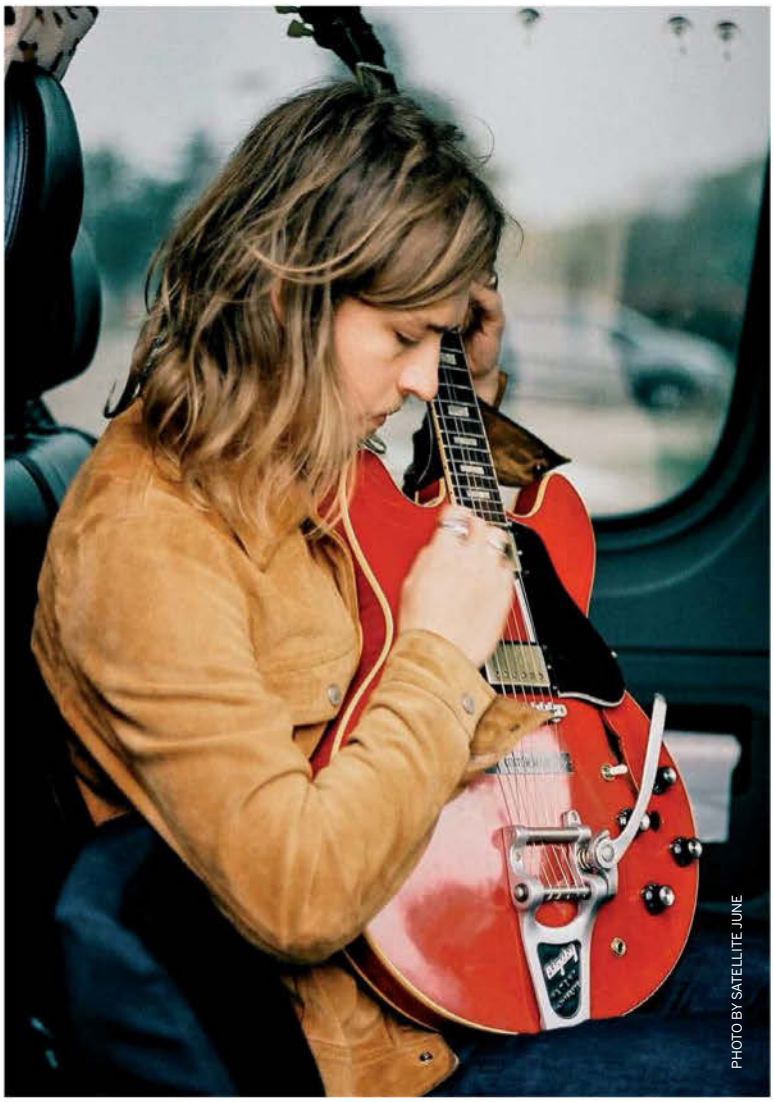


PHOTO BY SATELLITE JUNE

"Our touring van had a power outlet inside so I [auditioned] a '63 Firebird in McDonald's parking lot"

What's the most incredible find or bargain you've had when buying gear?

"I was at a vintage guitar show and at the end of the day there were a couple of stands selling cheap stuff. They were just basically giving stuff away and so I bought three basses for 200 euros. That's 66 euros each! One of them has been on a lot of the DeWolff records. It's a 60s Fasan; it's a German make and it's very comfortable. I put flat-wound strings on it, it's very resonant and it has all these crazy electronics. I'm still not sure what they do, but it's a great-sounding bass."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've experienced?

"Well, the same guitar that I had buyer's remorse with, I also have seller's remorse with. I didn't have the money to buy [this guitar], but I knew the seller and he was like, 'Well, you can pay 1,000 euros now and then pay 500 every month after that.' This was years ago and 1,000 euros was all the money I had and I wanted to buy this Waddy Wachtel Les Paul, which, if you look it up now, it's like eight or nine grand. Back then I could buy it for four. So I closed the deal with this guy and I paid 500 euros month after month. I was still a student so I was living off

PABLO'S GO-TO RIG

"The guitar is either a Firebird or a Les Paul. And then I have two Isle Of Tone fuzzes: one of them is more like a heavy overdrive and the other one is really like a fuzz. They're both germanium [transistor] based and I have either one of those on all the time. I have an A/B switch that either runs through to overdrive or fuzz, and I do all of my cleaning up with the volume on my guitar. So I'm constantly switching and dialling the pots. Then there's a bunch of pedals that I sometimes use. I have the Carl Martin HeadRoom spring reverb – that's also always on – and then I run that into my Fulltone Tube Tape Echo, which has a tube preamp onboard that is also always on. Then I run that into an 18-watt [Marshall] Bluesbreaker amp and a 90s JTM45 combo. I also have the heaviest boost pedal in existence: it's a Marshall half-stack that I switch on and off when the sound needs to be bigger for solos or extra heavy parts – or sometimes very quiet parts because I feel like if you're playing quietly on a big-sounding rig, that sounds very dangerous!"

PHOTO BY ELVIRA MIRAN

Pablo on stage with DeWolff sporting one of his favourite Les Pauls. And if he's not rocking an LP on stage, you'll likely find him with a Firebird

water and dry bread to pay off this guitar. Every show I was assessing it again and again, like, 'Is this guitar worth the money?' Some shows I was like, 'Yeah, it's great.' Some shows I was like, 'Nah, not really.' Then I got sick and tired of it and I just sold it for the same price I got it for. Later, when I did have the money, I was like, 'Oh, man...' So that's buyer's and seller's remorse in one, right?"

What's your best guitar-buying tip?

"I always follow my instincts. Basically, I find that if I buy something that later I'm not sure I should have bought, I can always sell it and buy something else because secondhand guitars hold their value most of the time. Go with the gut instinct."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window (or browsed online) and what were you looking at?

"Well, the area where I live now doesn't have any guitar shops, but I do spend a lot of time looking at guitars online. Recently, I was looking at a vintage Firebird and I got this guy's number who was selling it – it was a '63. We were on tour and so I actually had to meet with him in the parking lot of a McDonald's. We were there with our touring van and it had a power outlet inside, so I plugged my amp in the van and opened the doors and just played the Firebird there in the parking lot."

If forced to make a choice, would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp, or a cheap guitar and a top-notch amp?

"A cheap guitar and a top-notch amp. Because the amp is the last thing in the chain and, in a way, it does most of the work. I know a lot of players that play really cheap guitars, but they're like *old* cheap guitars – vintage cheap guitars. If you hook them up to a good-sounding amp, it can make all the difference. Whereas if you play the most expensive Custom Shop Les Paul through a cheap amp it's gonna sound like shit."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

"I am a big fan of humbuckers that don't sound like humbuckers – very low output humbuckers. So I'm gonna go with humbuckers. On my main guitar, the Les Paul, I use ThroBak PAF-style pickups, wound on the original machine that Gibson used to have in Kalamazoo in the 50s. So it's very close to an original PAF. Another guitar had two broken pickups and I had them rewound by a friend of mine. I told him I wanted the lowest output humbuckers you can get away with. So he wound them so they read like 6k or 7k, which is almost like a single coil. But they're great; they sound very clear and open and I love that." **[DM]**

DeWolff's latest album, *Love, Death & In Between*, is available on Mascot Records. The band's headlining UK tour begins in March
www.dewolff.nu

Huw Price's **Nitty Gritty**

Why Gibson's mini-humbucker should be everybody's fun-sized favourite

Mini-humbuckers

Gibson acquired the Epiphone company in 1957, along with all the tooling, and shipped everything over to Kalamazoo when production ceased on the East Coast. At that time, the quality of Epiphone guitars was on a par with Gibsons and – according to Gibson's current vice president of product, Matt Koehler – Epiphone was purchased in order to tap into new markets.

Epiphones couldn't be seen as mere rebranded Gibsons, and one way to establish the difference was to equip them with an exclusive pickup. Earlier in the 1950s, Epiphone had developed a single-coil pickup with off-centre pole screws and a rectangular metal cover. Gibson's later PAF humbucker looked a bit like a scaled-up version of Epiphone's 'New York' pickup, so it has been suggested that Gibson decided to develop a scaled-down humbucker that would retain the Epiphone look and slot into the body cutout with minimal adjustment.

> One way to establish the difference of Epiphones was to equip them with an exclusive pickup

The resulting mini humbucking pickup began appearing on Epiphones in 1961 and would later feature on various Gibson models throughout the 60s and 70s. The mini-humbucker also appeared in various forms, with significant differences in materials and construction.

Mini PAFs & Pat Nos

Seth Lover had always considered his full PAF humbucker design to be unnecessarily large and had explored the idea of a smaller version before Gibson acquired Epiphone. Unsurprisingly, the first mini-humbucker was essentially a scaled-down PAF and even carried the same 'Patent Applied For' decal.

The reduced dimensions required the use of nylon bobbins that were thinner and smaller than the PAF's butyrate bobbins. The coils were still wound with 42 AWG plain enamel magnet wire, but the bobbins limited the turns to approximately 4,250 compared with the PAF's nominal 5,000. Adjustable pole screws with a narrower diameter were used for one coil, but a rectangular ferrite bar was used in the other.

The Alnico V magnet was identical to the shorter 2 5/16-inch type used in later PAFs and Patent Number humbuckers, and with DC resistance readings of 7.5k and above, mini-humbuckers were on a par with some PAFs. The aperture – the area where the pickup detects string vibration – is narrower than a full-sized humbucker, which results in a brighter tone. Mini-humbucker inductance was lower than the full-sized versions, so they sound comparatively rolled off in the low-mids and bass.

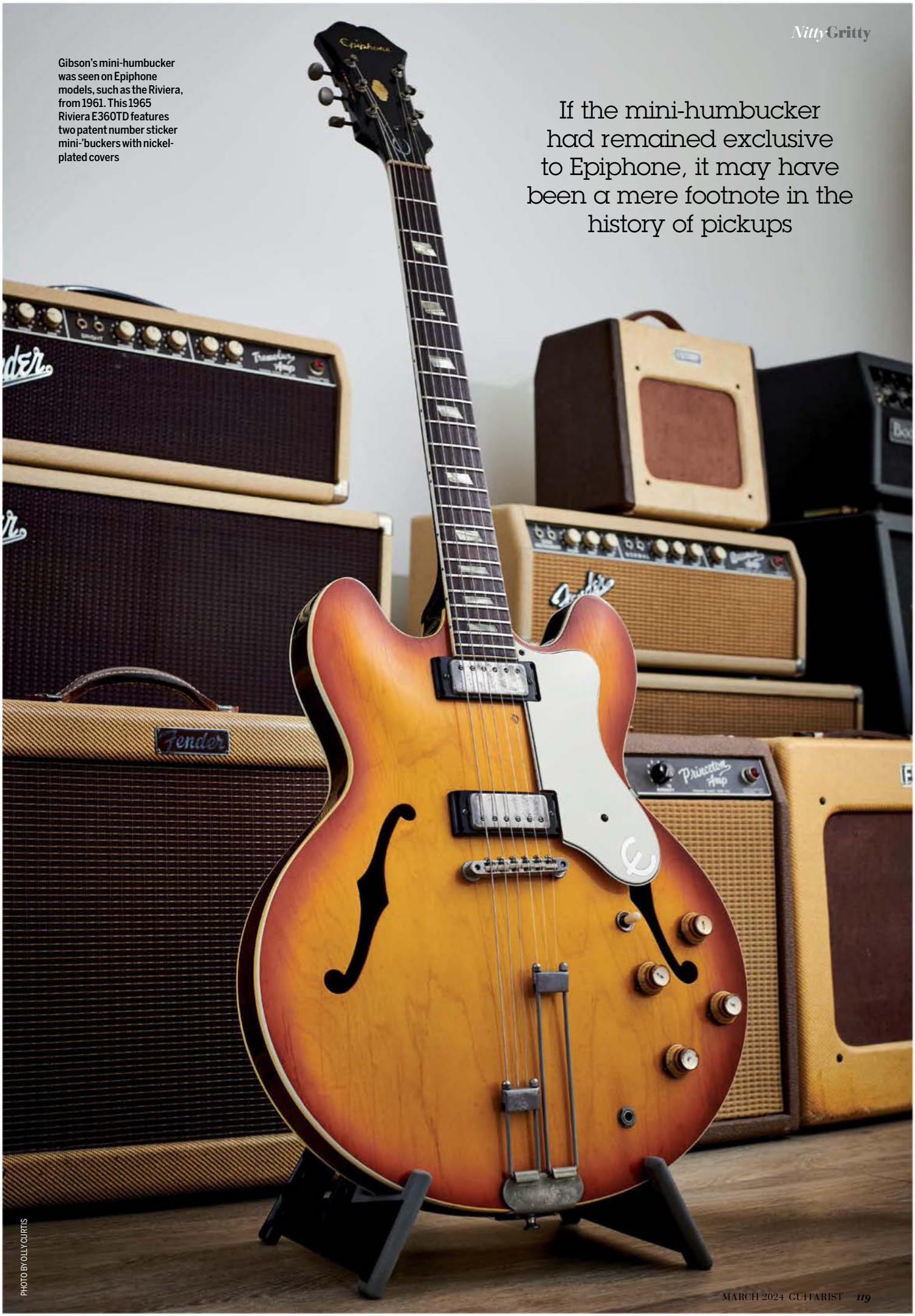
During 1961, the Epiphone Windsor, Riviera, Sheraton, Crestwood Custom, Sorrento, Broadway and Zephyr models started transitioning to mini-humbuckers. Later, they appeared in the Crestwood and Wilshire solidbodies, too. It's worth noting that if the mini-humbucker had remained exclusive to Epiphone, it may have been a mere footnote in the history of electric guitar pickups. But it went on to develop a following because they ended up being used in Gibson guitars.

The P19

Matt Koehler has suggested that the mini-humbucker actually came about as a result of a "proprietary request from Harmony in Chicago". This is not beyond the realm of possibility because various versions of Gibson's P13 pickup, which was the precursor of the P-90, had been fitted to

This 1960s Silvertone 1446L 'Chris Isaak', belonging to Richard Fortus, features stock Gibson-made mini humbucking pickups

PHOTO BY REED R RADCLIFFE



Gibson's mini-humbucker was seen on Epiphone models, such as the Riviera, from 1961. This 1965 Riviera E360TD features two patent number sticker mini-'buckers with nickel-plated covers

If the mini-humbucker had remained exclusive to Epiphone, it may have been a mere footnote in the history of pickups

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

Harmony guitars. Harmony was the parent company of Silvertone, and in 1961 the P19 appeared on the Silvertone 1446L, which would later become renowned as the Chris Isaak model.

This version of the mini-humbucker had three adjustable pole screws for each bobbin – three for the wound strings and three for the plain. This was an idea Lover would revisit when he left Gibson to design the Wide Range humbucker for Fender. To achieve this, the iron bar that was installed in one bobbin of Epiphone's version was cut in two and divided between the two bobbins. Like the Epiphone version, the P19 had a short Alnico bar magnet beneath the bobbins and coils wound with plain enamel wire.

If you're already thinking of grabbing a cheap pair of early mini-humbuckers from a Silvertone, bear in mind that Seth Lover claimed they weren't as loud as the Epiphone version and sounded a bit trebly but "did the job".

Johnny Smith

The signature model of renowned jazz guitarist Johnny Smith was actually the first Gibson to be equipped with mini-humbuckers. It was launched in 1961 and was available in both single- and double-pickup versions. The guitar itself was a premium archtop and the pickups were attached to the neck and pickguard, rather than mounted on the body. This was done to avoid cutting into the carved spruce top and adversely impacting the acoustic tone. So the pickups had to be made thinner and Gibson started by reducing the height of the covers.

Rather than place a bar magnet under the bobbin, they installed a magnetised blade in one bobbin, with the baseplate doubling as a ferrous coupler. Screwing the shortened pole screws into tapped holes in the baseplate completed the magnetic circuit.

Firebird Pickups

When the reverse Firebird model appeared in 1963, it was clearly intended as a high-end guitar so full-sized Patent Number humbuckers would have seemed the obvious choice. But with Gibson already using them on the all-mahogany SG and the ES models, maybe management decided they needed a real point of difference. P-90s were not an option because they had been relegated to student models, so attention turned to Epiphone mini-humbuckers. But rather than simply use those, Firebird pickups became a hybrid of the Epiphone and Johnny Smith versions.

In this case you can judge a pickup by its cover because the absence of holes indicates that pole screws were not used. Instead, rectangular bars were fitted in both bobbins and both were Alnico V magnets. One was positioned south up and the other north up. This meant that Gibson didn't need to use a separate bar magnet. Instead, a thin ferrous metal plate was fixed under the bobbins along with a pair of maple spacers. A conventional baseplate – with redundant pole screw holes – pressed the assembly into the cover and was secured in place by two solder joints.

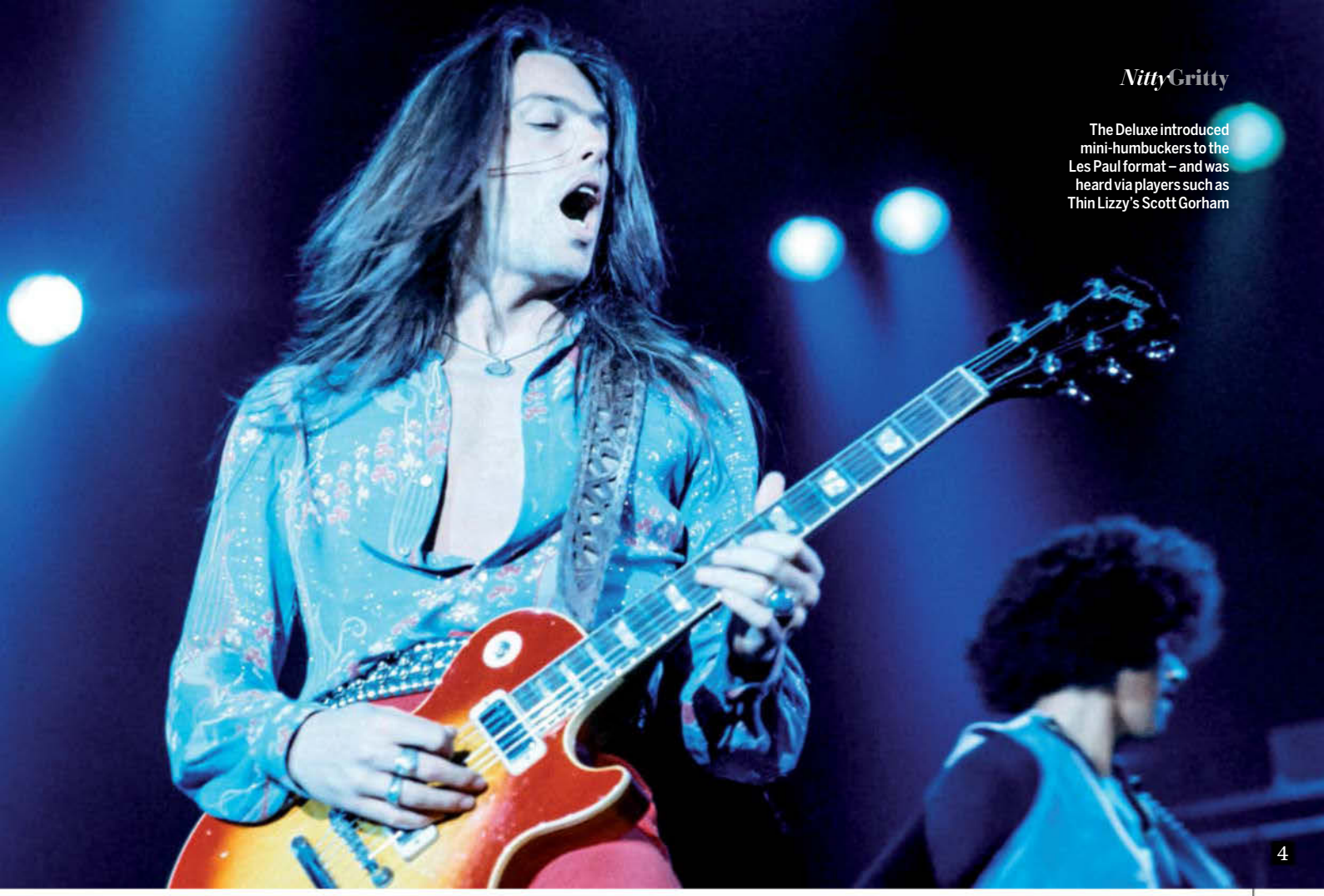
> Firebird pickups have less bass and low midrange grunt but retain clarity with overdrive

Firebird pickups have lower inductance than Epiphone mini-humbuckers, so they have less bass and low midrange grunt, but they're brighter, chimier and retain clarity with overdrive and distortion. The undisputed king of the Firebird, Johnny Winter, mostly stayed on the neck pickup, but Neil Young's unique tone comes from an early Firebird pickup installed in the bridge position of his Les Paul.

For the first two years of production, Firebird pickup coils were wound with 42 AWG plain enamel magnet wire. This changed in 1965 when Gibson began using

The 'reverse' Firebirds' bespoke pickups were influenced by Epiphone's mini-humbuckers and the pickups from Johnny Smith's Gibson signature

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS



The Deluxe introduced mini-humbuckers to the Les Paul format – and was heard via players such as Thin Lizzy's Scott Gorham

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PHOTO BY FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS

polysol wire. The bobbin wire colour also changed from black to white and the braided output wire exited from a notch cut in the baseplate. On the earlier versions, the braided wire emerged from a gap between the baseplate and the cover.

Some Firebird experts report that the polysol pickups sound thinner and brighter than the earlier plain enamel versions. Gibson also started using fewer turns, which further accentuated the pickup's toppy sonic character and reduced its output.

Deluxe 'Buckers

Coinciding with the regular PAF, mini-humbuckers started getting Patent Number decals around 1963. Evidence suggests that purple plain enamel wire was retained for mini-humbuckers through to 1965, but Gibson changed to orange polysol-coated magnet wire after that. These later Epiphone mini-humbuckers have their detractors, with the most common criticisms being thinness and excessive treble. However, the tone of this version is the one most of us will be familiar with because, after flirting with P-90s, Gibson chose to install mini-humbuckers in Les Pauls when the model was reintroduced during the late 1960s.

Gibson, supposedly, routed out a year's supply of Les Paul bodies for P-90s but soon discovered that all those Bloomfield, Clapton and Green fans were uninterested in 1950s-style pickups. Clearly, it would have cost too much to re-rout the bodies for full-sized humbuckers and discarding them wasn't an option. Instead, Jim Deurloo, who worked in Gibson's pattern shop, was tasked with finding a workaround. Deurloo realised that mini-humbuckers could fit inside P-90 cavities and a P-90-sized plastic ring was devised to mount the pickups and close the gaps. The Epiphone mini-humbucker remained the stock Les Paul Deluxe pickup from 1969 until 1982.

If you have ever heard a mini-humbucker on record, it was probably powering a Les Paul. Scott Gorham used them in Thin Lizzy, Pete Townshend played Les Paul Deluxes during the 70s, and Gary Rossington used mini-humbuckers for many of Lynyrd Skynyrd's seminal tracks before his '69 Goldtop got pinched in '73. More recently, they have been championed by both the guitarists from Kings Of Leon.

Lawrence Sidewinder

Following a limited run of so-called 'Medallion' Firebirds to celebrate the 1972 Olympic Games, Gibson marked the 200th anniversary of the Declaration Of Independence in 1976 with the Bicentennial Firebird reissue. Both models had the original 'reverse' body shape and used regular post-1965-style Firebird mini-humbuckers.

But there was a twist with the Bicentennial because Bill Lawrence's

If you've ever heard a mini-humbucker on record, it was probably powering a Les Paul

'Sidewinder' mini-humbucker was installed in the bridge. Both bobbins were spun around by 90 degrees so the wire coils are oriented towards the strings. Rectangular ferrite bars were pressed into the bobbins and a thick ceramic magnet was placed in between the bars in the centre of the assembly. These can be identified by the serial number stamped into the baseplate.

Firing Up

Vintage mini-humbucker pickups rarely come up for sale, and Firebird pickups are the rarest of all. Beware of recent-manufacture Firebird pickups because Gibson swapped to ceramic magnets and wound them to around 15k using thinner magnet wire.

Elsewhere, most bespoke pickups winders offer mini-humbuckers and the likes of Lollar, Sunbear, Seymour Duncan Antiquities and Fralin are often mentioned in dispatches. Just be aware that some modern Firebird types are too large for vintage metal surrounds. G

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Material World

Cabinet materials can make a big difference, but there are some who disagree. Paul Gough of Zilla Cabs takes a look at what's going on

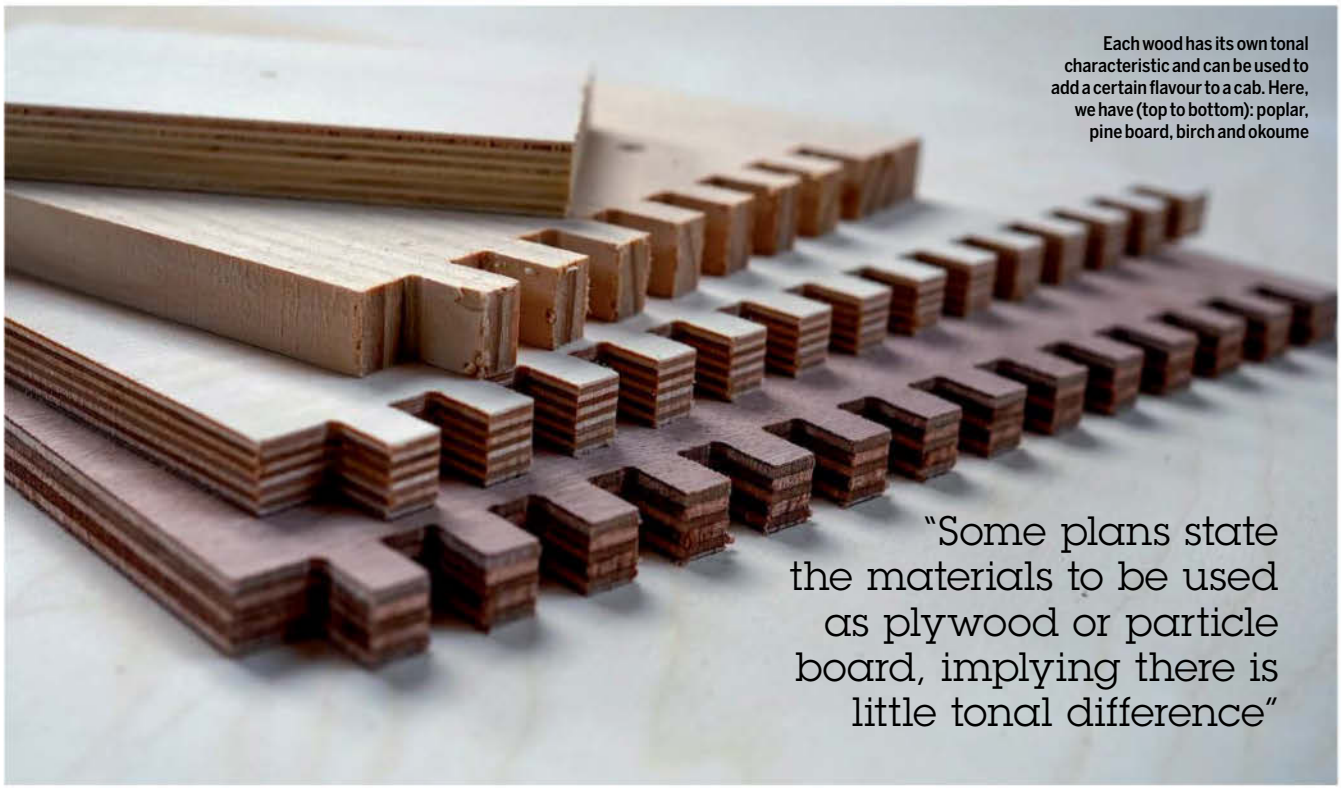
There is an ever increasing narrative that the wood or materials your speaker cabinet is made of don't make a difference. I'm not entirely sure where this started, but I have a feeling the two main culprits are YouTube and some cabinet design theory.

Some popular YouTube videos illustrate a lack of difference in sound between two cabs made of different materials. There's nothing quite like listening to examples, of course, so at first this seems to prove a point. But these videos usually rely on a clean tone, which can be an issue. In the room you may hear the difference, but when close mic'ing cabs you often need a more complex signal – usually one with more gain – for a clear illustration. So, while a compressed file coming out of your phone may seem to demonstrate that two cabs sound the same, being in the room or adding more gain would certainly show some contrast.

When it comes to some cabinet design theory, the idea that the wood used doesn't make a difference doesn't explicitly come from the theory as it's never stated as a fact, but it's often implied or the effects of material choice are assumed to be minimal and therefore ignored. A good example of this is the Electro-Voice design TL806 plans, which state the materials to be used as plywood or particle board, implying there is little tonal difference. This is also true of a lot of cabs built around Thiele/Small parameters where emphasis is placed on physical dimensions and internal volume of the cabinet and relation to technical specifications of the driver, rather than features like wood type.

I don't believe this is wholly unwarranted because a lot of the theory and design programmes were developed to help design perfect or ideal systems, closer to what PA and hi-fi users want. But guitar speakers are quite different. Rather than faithfully reproducing a signal, guitar cabs and speakers are generally designed to be part of the system, adding their own flavour to the sound.

As well as assuming the cabinet material makes no difference, there are other assumptions made in order to keep the maths tidy. The rigidity or stiffness of the cabinet's baffle, for example, which we've discussed in previous articles, makes a big difference to how a cabinet performs and will vary massively with size, number of speakers, thickness and density (a key indicator of the material used). I feel the assumption should be that for the formulae to work efficiently, it should be essential that the baffle be rigid, and therefore imperative that a suitable material be used, rather than assuming that the baffle will be rigid and therefore the material is unimportant.



Each wood has its own tonal characteristic and can be used to add a certain flavour to a cab. Here, we have (top to bottom): poplar, pine board, birch and okoume

"Some plans state the materials to be used as plywood or particle board, implying there is little tonal difference"

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAUL GOUGH

I can't help but think of a certain chap from my childhood, and how he would have struggled greatly with a wobbleboard made of 38mm marble, rather than his 6mm flexible plywood... An extreme example, perhaps! But it does illustrate how material choice and thickness affects rigidity.

More Than Maths

I bet some of you are thinking how convenient it is for me to dismiss the maths. Maths is hard and it's easier to say 'this isn't important', but that's not where I'm coming from. My background is in mathematics and physics. In fact, that's why I got started in cabinet design; I thought it would be easy to refine the formulae to take into account some of the real-world considerations. But the more I listened to speaker cabinets and figured out which aspects affected the sound and, more importantly, how each of these

> "The more I listened to speaker cabinets, the more I learned to trust my ears and not just the equations"

aspects coexisted and affected each other, the more I learned to trust my ears and not just the equations.

Guitar tones, for me, have never been perfect, or at least not if you're wearing your white coat. Think of our most-loved amps; they are almost laughably inefficient at cleanly and accurately amplifying our signal. In fact, clean is not what a lot of us want. A lot of the greatest guitar sounds, if analysed, would probably be nearer to bad and broken than clean and accurate – and that's what makes guitars fun.

Now that we've dealt with the ideas behind the claims, in next month's issue we'll take a look at a few common materials, what they sound like and how their tonal differences can be utilised to help sculpt your sound. G

David Davidson's Vintage Icons

Owned by a legendary player, this may be one of the first Lake Placid Blue Fenders

1960 Telecaster

Alvino Rey's Tele remains in an untouched condition – even its frets are original

"This guitar has a very interesting backstory because it's a 1960 Lake Placid Blue Telecaster that was owned by Alvino Rey. He was a fantastic multi-instrumentalist and an electronics pioneer who was involved with developing pickups and effects for electric guitars. But besides the provenance, the finish predates the official introduction of Lake Placid Blue by around 23 months. Fender's custom colour chart came out in November 1961, so any Fender with a non-standard finish made before then was usually a trade show guitar or made for a famous player.

"Lake Placid Blue replaced San Marino Blue in Fender's line-up, but when San Marino was being used it wasn't an official option. Starting in 1957, there was a little blurb in the Fender catalogue that said you could custom order a colour for an additional five per cent over the standard price. Fender had bought a quantity of San Marino, so it was what customers would have received if they ordered a metallic blue guitar during the 1950s.

"The guitar still has its brown Tolex case, which has Alvino's luggage tag with his home address, and a Christmas card featuring the Rey family. They're all sitting on a couch in the living room holding different Fender guitars. There's also a personal letter from Alvino and all the original hang tags. Unfortunately, I don't have any photos of him playing this Telecaster, but one of the family members is holding it on the Christmas card.

"Alvino was a good friend of Leo Fender and he became one of their 'test pilots'... The luggage label shows he must have travelled with this one. He also worked with Leo on many steel-guitar innovations because he was a premier steel player at that time.

"Earlier in his career, Alvino worked for Gibson. He started in 1935 and by 1938 or 1939 he had developed the pickup that went into the first 'Charlie Christian' guitars. Alvino was a jazz guitar player and he accompanied The King Sisters, which became The King Family. The King Family Christmas show was a yearly television event and I don't know any person here in the United States, over the age of 40, who wasn't familiar with it.

"They were also invited to do many events for other networks because the girls could really sing and they had a great band. Alvino did all that and worked for many others along the way. He played on *Blue Hawaii* by Elvis Presley, and he's actually the grandfather of two members of Arcade Fire.

> "Pre-'62 slab-'board Teles with custom colours are almost impossible to find"

"This guitar has a special kind of feeling to it because it's a little bit lighter than most Telecasters. The colour remains brilliant and it hasn't greened at all, but Alvino clearly used it and it does have a bit of wear and tear. There's a lovely green 'guard and the original bridge cover is still there. The body is alder, rather than ash, and there's a slab rosewood fretboard. Slab-'board Teles made before 1962 are hard enough to find, but with custom colours they're almost impossible. And to have a custom colour example that pre-dates the colour chart makes it pretty amazing.

"I've always considered myself a 50s custom colour guy because you have to do more detective work with those guitars. There was no chart that you could compare the colours to. Although this Telecaster's finish could have been called something else when it was made, it's clearly Lake Placid Blue and it wasn't sprayed over any other finish. So there's no sunburst under there.

"It's a richer colour than San Marino Blue, which has a slightly darker shade overall, and the metal flake in the paint doesn't rise to the top like it does with Lake Placid Blue. You can tint any metallic colour by how the metallic component lays in the paint. It can be in the base or at the top and that alters the whole colour because it makes the light refract differently.

"By the late 50s all the colours except the sparkle finishes were being sprayed by Fender in-house. The original Lake Placid Blue wasn't cellulose based; it was actually an acrylic lacquer called Lucite. The nitrocellulose lacquers were Duco. Cadillac introduced the colour in 1958 and Fender used it from 1960 until 1973.

"Alvino's Telecaster is untouched and original in every way. We ended up getting it quite a few years ago and I had it in the Songbirds Museum collection for a while. When we closed the museum, I brought it back with me to New York and it's now for sale in the shop. It's a real pretty one." **[HP]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563

Inside the original Tolex case is a Christmas card featuring owner Alvino Rey and his family, plus a personal letter from the guitarist

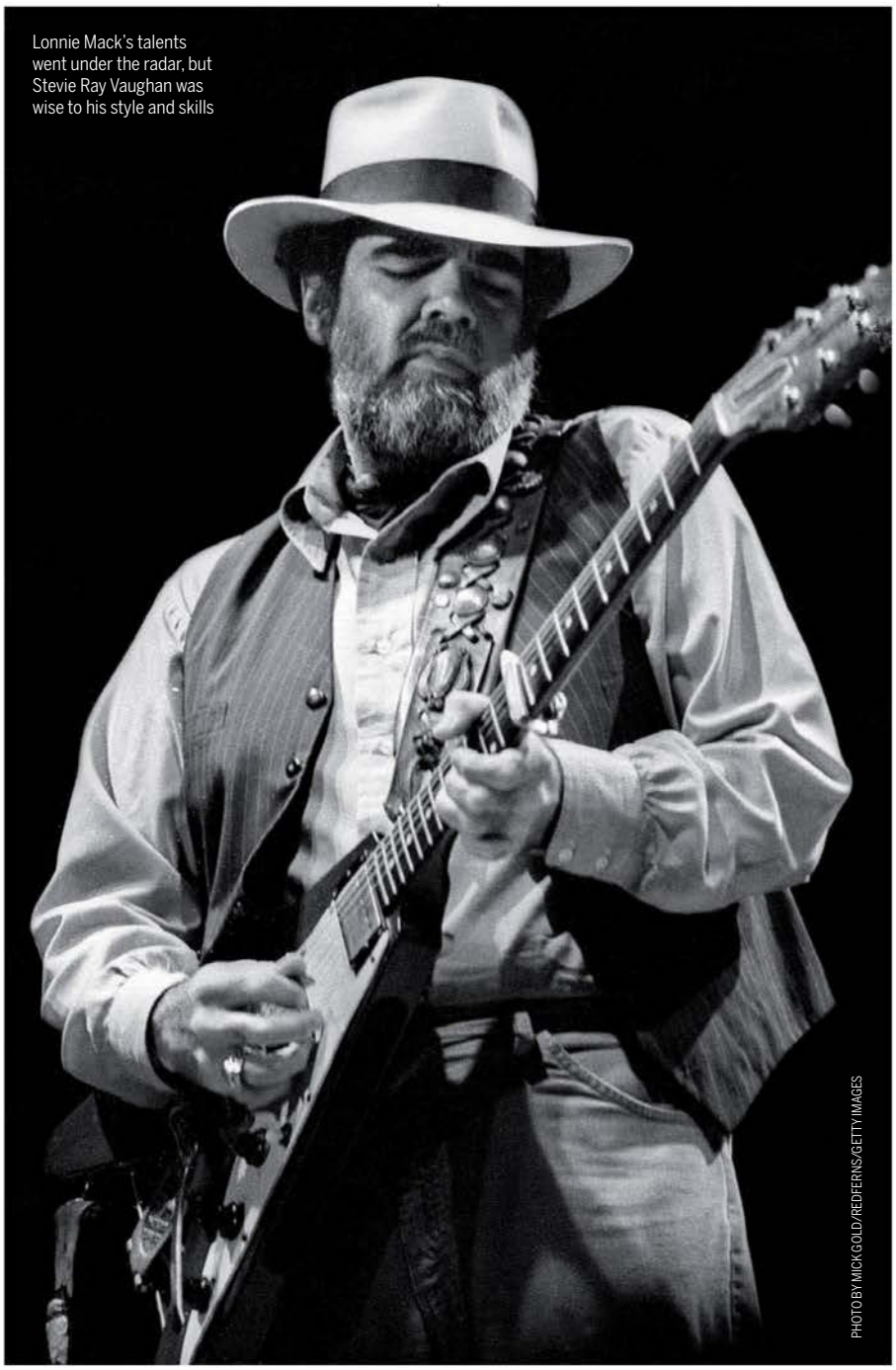
PHOTOS BY PAIGE DAVIDSON/WELLSTRUNG GUITARS

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks

Lonnie Mack & SRV

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Knaggs Choptank & Vox AC15 C1
Difficulty ★★★★☆ | 20 mins per example



Lonnie Mack's talents went under the radar, but Stevie Ray Vaughan was wise to his style and skills

PHOTO BY MICK GOLD/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

LONNIE MACK is something of an unsung hero in the development of the modern guitar solo. He had a somewhat chequered career, reportedly through being difficult to pigeonhole and subsequently market, and it sounds as if he didn't really play the 'fame game'. Lonnie's top priority was playing the music he wanted to play, not pandering to record companies for the sake of bigger profits.

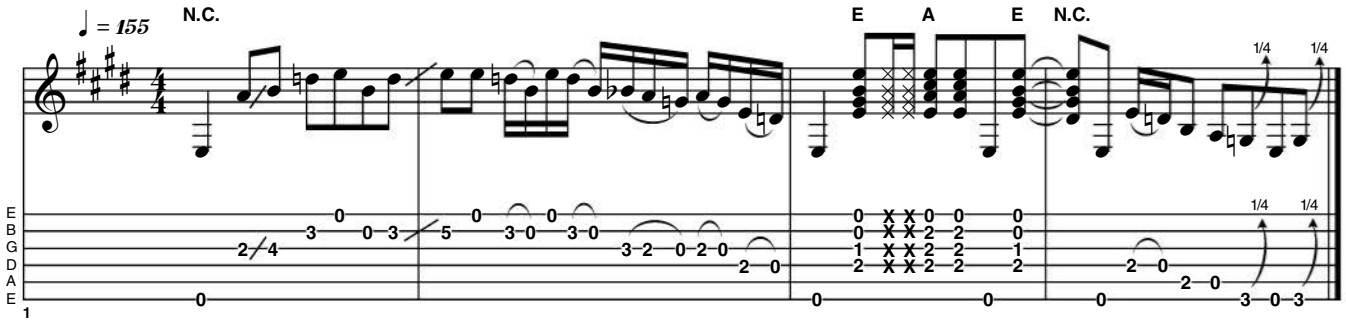
Having said that, he did record several albums over the course of his career, the first of which, *The Wham Of That Memphis Man!*, introduced his loud, fast and precise technique to a generation of incredulous players. Unfortunately, the British Blues Invasion and poor marketing resulted in something of a false start to his career. Nevertheless, he didn't stop playing and came to be regarded as a contemporary to players such as Roy Buchanan, Albert Collins and Stevie Ray Vaughan. In fact, SRV enticed Lonnie to relocate to Austin, Texas, and co-produced what became his comeback album *Strike Like Lightning* in 1985.

The idea of the solo/examples here is to capture some of Lonnie's style and combine it with the influence he clearly had on Stevie when creating the relentless instrumental *Scuttle Buttin'*. The energy level is pretty high at 155bpm and you'll benefit greatly from routing some of the phrases slowly. That said, this is most definitely not a technical study in any specific technique, though there are a couple of passages where you might want to use alternate picking. Most of the time you'll find the logical approach is picking the first note played on each string, followed by a hammer-on or pull-off. There's a case for saying try this as fast as you can, then look at problem areas slowly. I hope you enjoy and see you next time!

Richard Barrett's album, *Colours* (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

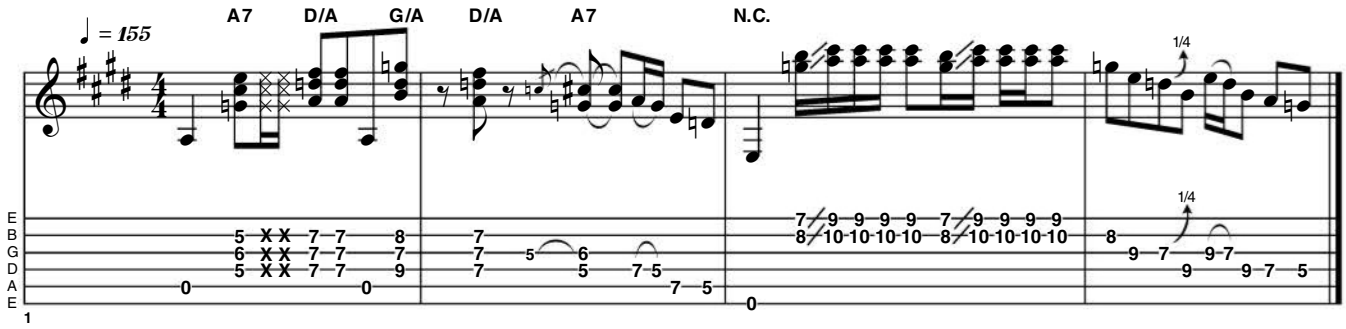
Example 1

THIS FIRST SECTION ESTABLISHES A PATTERN OF STARTING WITH A STRONG ROOT NOTE, then launching into a single-note line or chord figure. It's important to keep things moving and reference the chord harmony, as we only have drums and bass as backing, very much like SRV when he played with Double Trouble. It's also worth spending some time dialling in the right amount of drive to carry the single-note lines – but keep definition on the chords.



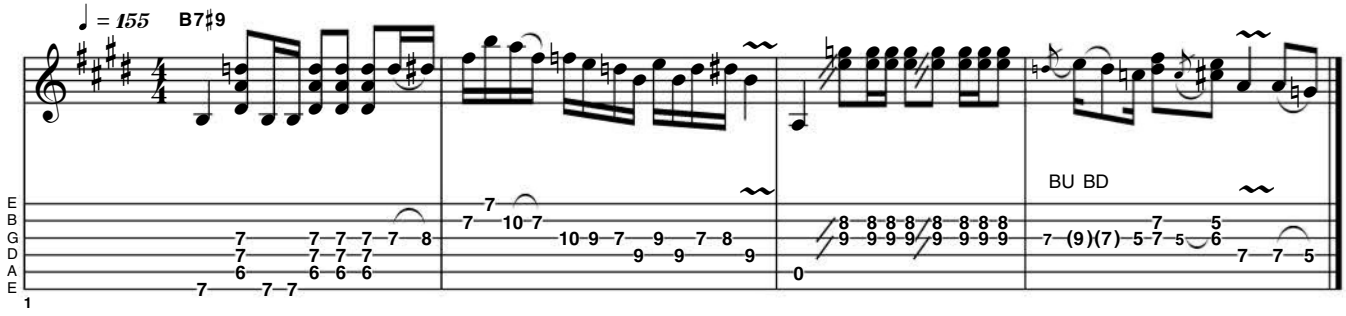
Example 2

CHANGING TO A (OR THE IV CHORD), we're no longer able to rely so much on open strings, but the moving triads of A7-D and G (all over the A implied by the bass) give a full sound that allows us to move things up a register for the following bar. These higher notes fill less musical space, but I'm compensating by using doublestops after hitting a big open low E at the start of bar 3.



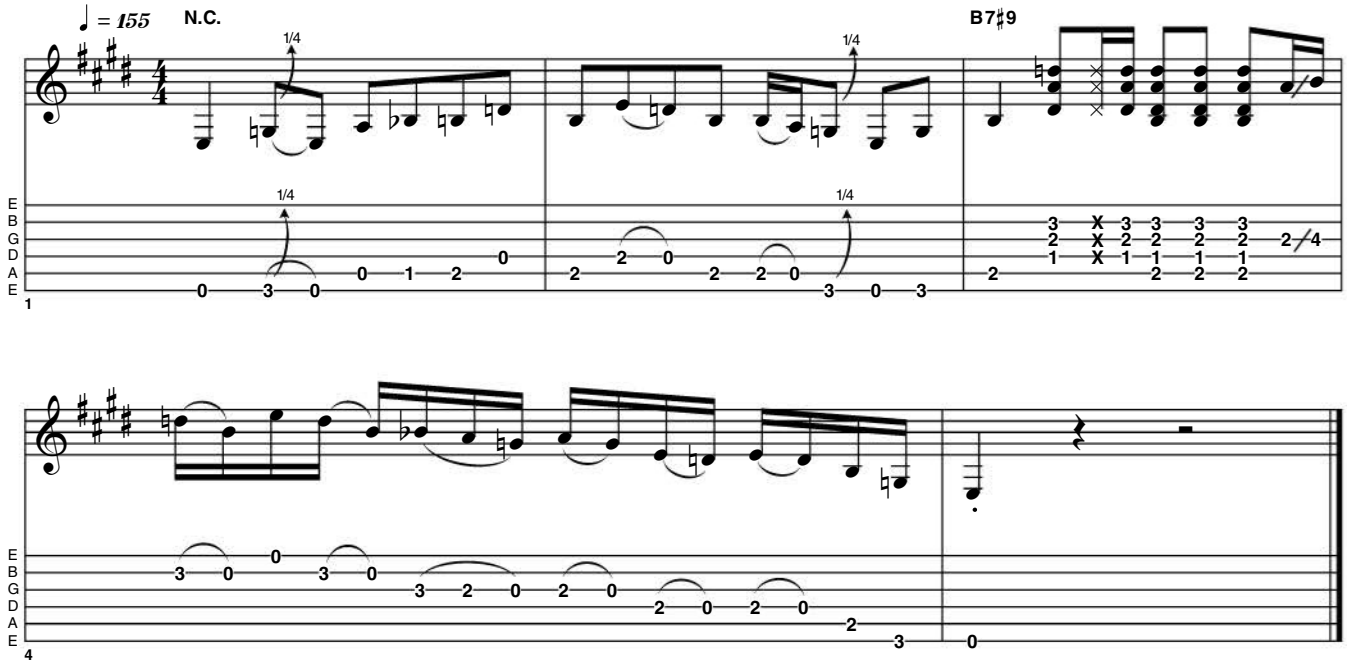
Example 3

IN THIS SECTION OF THE SOLO, we start with the V chord (B) – actually B7#9 – then change to the IV chord (A). In bars 1 and 3 I'm establishing the harmony by hitting the root note on beat 1, followed by a chord or doublestop figure. In bars 2 and 4 I'm 'answering' with a single-note solo approach using the blues scale, plus featuring the major/minor 3rds of each chord as happens so often in the blues.



Example 4

FOR THIS FINAL SECTION, we're returning to chord I, with a bar of B7#9 functioning as a turnaround. The first two bars feature a twanging melodic passage using the lower strings. Bar 3 is where we change to B7#9 – an extended version of the V chord. The final bar is a frenetic run down shape 1 of the E blues scale. You may find hitting the first note on each string with a downstroke works well here, but there is no wrong approach.



Hear It Here

LONNIE MACK
THE WHAM OF THAT MEMPHIS MAN!

Lonnie's 1963 debut album kicks off with the single *Wham!*. It's easy to understand why guitarists would be wowed by this sure-footed playing, with the guitar (then a relatively new solo instrument) firmly at front and centre. *The Bounce* demonstrates how Lonnie combined rock 'n' roll, soul and blues, perhaps not so difficult to market today as it was in 1963! Finally, check out *Memphis* for masterful use of triads, doublestops and melodic lines.

STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN
COULDN'T STAND THE WEATHER

Fast forward to 1984 and the blues/soul/rock guitar is thriving in the hands of SRV, who had deservedly become renowned for his soulful yet forceful playing. Check out the album's opener, *Scuttle Buttin'*, and the Lonnie Mack influence is immediately apparent. *Cold Shot* is a vocal track but features plenty of guitar with the fast Leslie/vibrato effect Lonnie was fond of. Finally, you can't get a clearer tribute than SRV's own version of *Wham!*.

LONNIE MACK
STRIKE LIKE LIGHTING

1985 saw a major return to the spotlight for Lonnie, with SRV on co-production. There is a high-gloss sheen throughout (as was the fashion at the time), but Lonnie's playing retains its raw edge. On *Hound Dog Man* he intersperses his bluesy vocals with distorted fills. The frenetic *Double Whammy* showcases him on vintage form, duelling with SRV. To finish, *You Ain't Got Me* combines fiery playing and vocals in the way that Lonnie pioneered back in 1963.

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PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER

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They were born in the 50s and forgotten about shortly afterwards – but today, offsets are the epitome of cool

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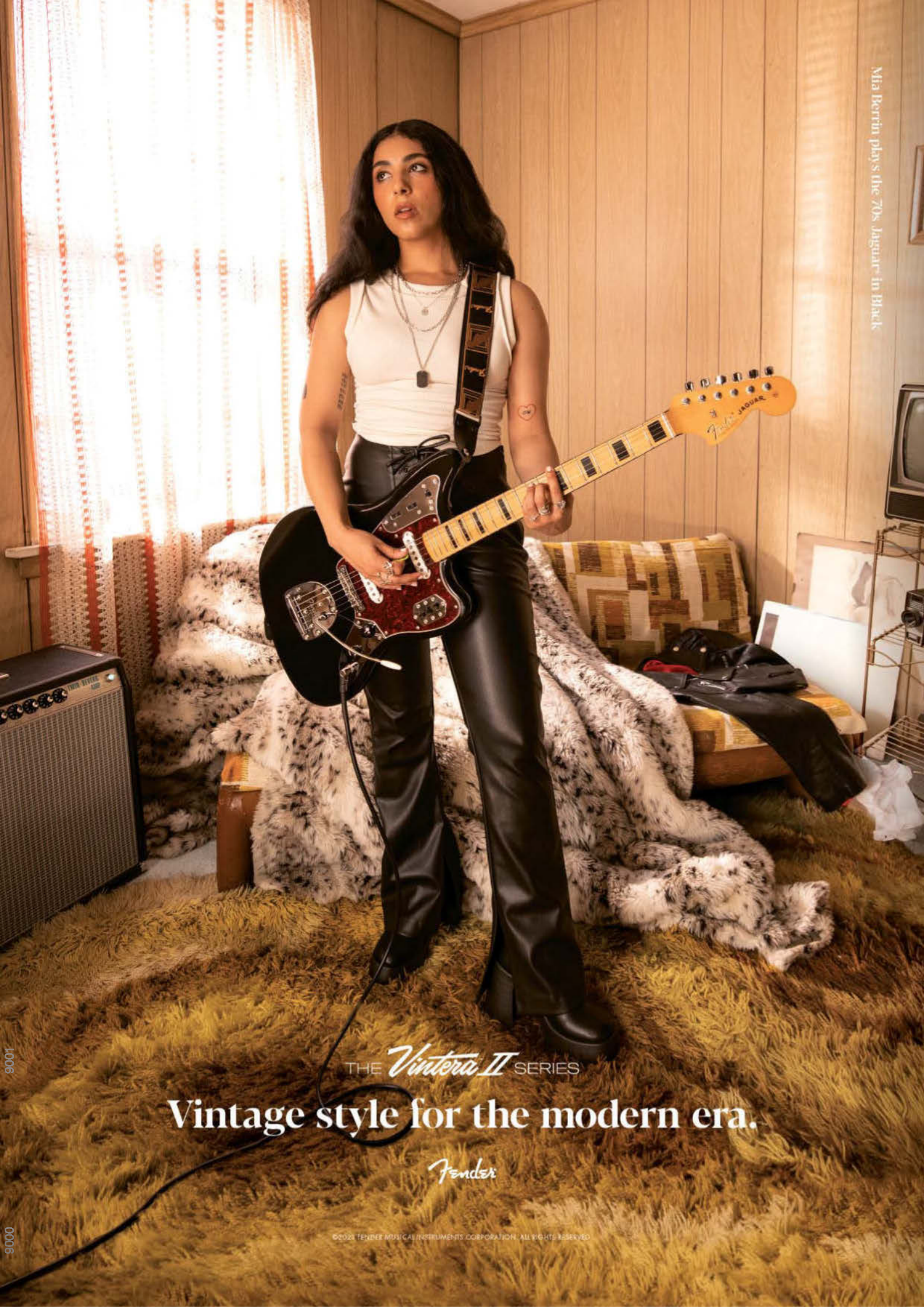
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